The Cab of the Sleeping Horse

John Reed Scott

SHE THREW UP HER HAND, AND A NASTY LITTLE AUTOMATIC WAS COVERING THE SECRETARY'S HEART.

Drawn by William Van Dresser. (*Chapter 24.*)

The Cab of The Sleeping Horse

By

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I

THE PHOTOGRAPH

"A BEAUTIFUL woman is never especially clever," Rochester remarked.

Harleston blew a smoke ring at the big drop-light on the table and watched it swirl under the cardinal shade.

"The cleverest woman I know is also the most beautiful," he replied. "Yes, I can name her offhand. She has all the finesse of her sex, together with the reasoning mind; she is surpassingly good to look at, and knows how to use her looks to obtain her end; as the occasion demands, she can be as cold as steel or warm as a summer's night; she——"

"How are her morals?" Rochester interrupted.

"Morals or the want of them do not, I take it, enter into the question," Harleston responded. "Cleverness is quite apart from morals."

"You have not named the wonderful one," Clarke reminded him.

"And I won't now. Rochester's impertinent question forbids introducing her to this company. Moreover," as he drew out his watch, "it is half-after-twelve of a fine spring night, and, unless we wish to be turned out of the Club, we would better be going homeward or elsewhere. Who's for a walk up the avenue?"

"I am—as far as Dupont Circle," said Clarke.

"All hands?" Harleston inquired.

"It's too late for exercise," Rochester declined; "and our way lies athwart your path."

"I don't think you make good company, anyway, with your questions and your athwarts," Harleston retorted amiably, as Clarke and he moved off.

"Who is your clever woman?" asked Clarke.

"Curious?" Harleston smiled.

"Naturally—it's not in you to give praise undeserved."

"I'm not sure it is praise, Clarke; it depends on one's point of view. However, the lady in question bears several names which she uses as expediency or her notion suits her. Her maiden name was Madeline Cuthbert. She married a Colonel Spencer of Ours; he divorced her, after she had eloped with a rich young lieutenant of his regiment. She didn't marry the lieutenant; she simply plucked him clean and he shot himself. I've never understood why he didn't first shoot her."

"Doubtless it shows her cleverness?" Clarke remarked.

"Doubtless it does," replied Harleston, neatly spitting a leaf on the pavement with his stick. "Afterward she had various adventures with various wealthy men, and always won. Her particularly spectacular adventure was posing, at the instigation of the Duke of Lotzen, as the wife of the Archduke Armand of Valeria; and she stirred up a mess of turmoil until the matter was cleared up."

"I remember something of it!" Clarke exclaimed.

"By that time she had so fascinated her

employer, the Duke of Lotzen, that he actually married her—morganatically, of course."

"Again showing her astonishing cleverness."

"Just so—and, cleverer still, she held him until his death five years later. Which death, despite the authorized report, was not natural: the King of Valeria killed him in a sword duel in Ferida Palace on the principal street of Dornlitz. The lady then betook herself to Paris and took up her present life of extreme respectability—and political usefulness to our friends of Wilhelm-strasse. In fact, I understand that she has more than made good professionally, as well as fascinated at least half a dozen Cabinet Ministers besides.

"Wilhelm-strasse?" Clarke queried.

Harleston nodded. "She is in the German Secret Service."

"They trust her?" Clarke marvelled.

"That is the most remarkable thing about her," said Harleston, "so far as I know, she has never been false to the hand that paid her."

"Which, in her position, is the cleverest thing of all!" Clarke remarked.

They passed the English Legation, a bulging, three-storied, red brick, dormer-roofed atrocity,

standing a few feet in from the sidewalk; ugly as original sin, externally as repellent as the sidewalk and the narrow little drive under the *porte-cochère* are dirty.

"It's a pity," said Clarke, "that the British Legation cannot afford a man-servant to clean its front."

"No one is presumed to arrive or leave except in carriages or motor cars," Harleston explained. "*They* can push through the dirt to the entrance."

"Why, would you believe it," Clarke added, "the deep snow of last February lay on the walks untouched until well into the following day. The blooming Englishmen just then began to appreciate that it had snowed the previous night. Are they so slow on the secret-service end?"

"They have quite enough speed on that end," Harleston responded. "They are on the job always and ever—also the Germans."

"You've bumped into them?"

"Frequently."

"Ever encounter the clever lady, with the assortment of husbands?"

"Once or twice. Moreover, having known her as a little girl, and her family before her, I've

been interested to watch her travelling—her remarkable career. And it has been a career, Clarke; believe me, it's been a career. For pure cleverness, and the appreciation of opportunities with the ability to grasp them, the devil himself can't show anything more picturesque. My hat's off to her!"

"I should like to meet her," Clarke said.

"Come to Paris, sometime when I'm there, and I'll be delighted to present you to her."

"Doesn't she ever come to America?"

"I think not. She says the Continent, and Paris in particular, is good enough for her."

Harleston left Clarke at Dupont Circle and turned down Massachusetts Avenue.

The broad thoroughfare was deserted, yet at the intersection of Eighteenth Street he came upon a most singular sight.

A cab was by the curb, its horse lying prostrate on the asphalt, its box vacant of driver.

Harleston stopped. What had he here! Then he looked about for a policeman. Of course, none was in sight. Policemen never are in sight on Massachusetts Avenue.

As a general rule, Harleston was not inquisitive

as to things that did not concern him—especially at one o'clock in the morning; but the waiting cab, the deserted box, the recumbent horse in the shafts excited his curiosity.

The cab, probably, was from the stand in Dupont Circle; and the cabby likely was asleep inside the cab, with a bit too much rum aboard. Nevertheless, the matter was worth a step into Eighteenth Street and a few seconds' time. It might yield only a drunken driver's mutterings at being disturbed; it might yield much of profit. And the longer Harleston looked the more he was impelled to investigate. Finally curiosity prevailed.

The door of the cab was closed and he looked inside.

The cab was empty.

As he opened the door, the sleeping horse came suddenly to life; with a snort it struggled to its feet, then looked around apologetically at Harleston, as though begging to be excused for having been caught in a most reprehensible act for a cab horse.

"That's all right, old boy," Harleston smiled. "You doubtless are in need of all the sleep you can get. Now, if you'll be good enough to stand

still, we'll have a look at the interior of your appendix."

The light from the street lamps penetrated but faintly inside the cab, so Harleston, being averse to lighting a match save for an instant at the end of the search, was forced to grope in semi-darkness.

On the cushion of the seat was a light lap spread, part of the equipment of the cab. The pockets on the doors yielded nothing. He turned up the cushion and felt under it: nothing. On the floor, however, was a woman's handkerchief, filmy and small, and without the least odour clinging to it.

"Strange!" Harleston muttered. "They are always covered with perfume."

Moreover, while a very expensive handkerchief, it was without initial—which also was most unusual.

He put the bit of lace into his coat and went on with the search:

Three American Beauty roses, somewhat crushed and broken, were in the far corner. From certain abrasions in the stems, he concluded that they had been torn, or loosed, from a woman's corsage.

He felt again—then he struck a match, leaning

well inside the cab so as to hide the light as much as possible.

The momentary flare disclosed a square envelope standing on edge and close in against the seat. Extinguishing the match, he caught it up.

It was of white linen of superior quality, without superscription, and sealed; the contents were very light—a single sheet of paper, likely.

The handkerchief, the crushed roses, the unaddressed, sealed envelope—the horse, the empty and deserted cab, standing before a vacant lot, at one o'clock in the morning! Surely any one of them was enough to stir the imagination; together they were a tantalizing mystery, calling for solution and beckoning one on.

Harleston took another look around, saw no one, and calmly pocketed the envelope. Then, after noting the number of the cab, No. 333, he gathered up the lines, whipped the ends about the box, and chirped to the horse to proceed.

The horse promptly obeyed; turned west on Massachusetts Avenue, and backed up to his accustomed stand in Dupont Circle as neatly as though his driver were directing him.

Harleston watched the proceeding from the

corner of Eighteenth Street; after which he resumed his way to his apartment in the Collingwood.

A sleepy elevator boy tried to put him off at the fourth floor, and he had some trouble in convincing the lad that the sixth was his floor. In fact, Harleston's mind being occupied with the recent affair, he would have let himself be put off at the fourth floor, if he had not happened to notice the large gilt numbers on the glass panel of the door opposite the elevator. The bright light shining through this panel caught his eye, and he wondered indifferently that it should be burning at such an hour.

Subsequently he understood the light in No. 401; but then it was too late. Had he been delayed ten seconds, or had he gotten off at the fourth floor, he would have—. However, I anticipate; or rather I speculate on what would have happened under hypothetical conditions—which is fatuous in the extreme; hypothetical conditions never are existent facts.

Harleston, having gained his apartment, leisurely removed from his pockets the handkerchief, the roses, and the envelope, and placed them on

the library table. With the same leisureliness, he removed his light top-coat and his hat and hung them in the closet. Returning to the library, he chose a cigarette, tapped it on the back of his hand, struck a match, and carefully passed the flame across the tip. After several puffs, taken with conscious deliberation, he sat down and took up the handkerchief.

This was Harleston's way: to delay deliberately the gratification of his curiosity, so as to keep it always under control. An important letter—where haste was not an essential—was unopened for a while; his morning newspaper he would let lie untouched beside his plate for sufficiently long to check his natural inclination to glance hastily over the headlines of the first page. In everything, he tried by self-imposed curbs to teach himself poise and patience and a quiet mind. He had been at it for years. By now he had himself well in hand; though, being exceedingly impetuous by nature, he occasionally broke over.

His course in this instance was typical—the more so, indeed, since he had broken over and lost his poise only that afternoon. He wanted to know what was inside that blank envelope. He

was persuaded it contained that which would either solve the mystery of the cab, or would in itself lead on to a greater mystery. In either event, a most interesting document lay within his reach—and he took up the handkerchief. Discipline! The curb must be maintained.

And the handkerchief yielded nothing—not even when inspected under the drop-light and with the aid of a microscope. Not a mark to indicate who carried it nor whence it came.—Yet stay; in the closed room he detected what had been lost in the open: a faint, a very faint, odour as of azurea sachet. It was only a suggestion; vague and uncertain, and entirely absent at times. And Harleston shook his head. The very fact that there was nothing about it by which it might be identified indicated the deliberate purpose to avoid identification. He put it aside, and, taking up the roses, laid them under the light.

They were the usual American Beauties; only larger and more gorgeous than the general run —which might be taken as an indication of the wealth of the giver, or of the male desire to please the female; or of both. Of course, there was the possibility that the roses were of the woman's own

buying; but women rarely waste their own money on American Beauties—and Harleston knew it. A minute examination convinced him that they had been crushed while being worn and then trampled on. The stems, some of the green leaves, and the edges of one of the blooms were scarred as by a heel; the rest of the blooms were crushed but not scarred. Which indicated violence—first gentle, then somewhat drastic.

He put the flowers aside and picked up the envelope, looked it over carefully, then, with a peculiarly thin and very sharp knife, he cut the sealing of the flap so neatly that it could be resealed and no one suspect it had been opened. As he turned back the flap, a small unmounted photograph fell out and lay face upward on the table.

Harleston gave a low whistle of surprise.

It was Madeline Spencer.

II

THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

"Good morning, madame!" said Harleston, bowing to the photograph. "This is quite a surprise. You're taken very recently, and you're worth looking at for divers æsthetic reasons—none of which, however, is the reason for your being in the envelope."

He drew out the sheet of paper and opened it. On it were typewritten, without address nor signature, these letters:

D P N F N Z Q F E F B P O Y V O A E E L E H H E J Y D
B I W F T C C F V D X N Q Y C E C L U G S U G D Z Y J
E N R Y U I G Y B S N R T D U H J W H G Y Z I P E P A
W P P O I M C H E I P R F B J X F V W W F T Z N J P Y
U F J D I L D C E M B R V Z D A Y V A W A L U M O F N
F C V D P G L P W F U U W V I E P T K V I P U M S F Z
N P S J J R F Y A S G Z S D A C S I G Y U O F C E X A
A O I D J J F C J P S O N P K U U Y V C V C T I H D P
X M N O Y K E N H U S K H Y M S F R R P C Y W S L L W
S M V P P U N E I F I D J L Z R W E H P Q G O D F U Z
T C E M Q I Q W N F Y J T A A L U M H J X I L E E H Y
I S O V O A Z U C U D I N B R L U Z I C U O T T U S V
L P N F F V Q F A N P V C Y J H I L T P F I S G H C W
H Y I C P P N F D O U O C L D U W E I V I P J N Q B V
Z L M I J R V K D S F R L W E G B K Q Y W S F F B E I
Y O R H M Y S H T E C P U T M P J X F N R N E E U M E
I L J B W V.

"Cipher!" commented Harleston, looking at it with half-closed eyes. . . . "The Blocked-Out Square, I imagine. No earthly use in trying to dig it out without the key-word; and the key-word —" he gave a shrug. "I'll let Carpenter try his hand on it; it's too much for me."

He knew from experience the futility of attempting the solution of a cipher by any but an expert; and even with an expert it was rarely successful.

As a general rule, the key to a secret cipher is discovered only by accident or by betrayal. There are hundreds of secret ciphers—any person can devise one—in everyday use by the various departments of the various governments; but, in the main, they are amplifications or variations of some half-dozen that have become generally accepted as susceptible of the quickest and simplest translation with the key, and the most puzzling without the key. Of these, the Blocked-Out Square, first used by Blaise de Vigenèrie in 1589, is probably still the most generally employed, and, because of its very simplicity, the most impossible of solution. Change the key-word and one has a new cipher. Any word will do; nor does it matter how often a letter is repeated; neither is

one held to one word: it may be two or three or any reasonable number. Simply apply it to the alphabetic Blocked-Out Square and the message is evident; no books whatever are required. A slip of paper and a pencil are all that are necessary; any one can write the square; there is not any secret as to it. The secret is the key-word.

Harleston took a sheet of paper and wrote the square:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A
C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B
D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C
E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D
F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E
G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F
H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G
I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H
J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I
K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J
L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K
M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L
N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M
O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N
P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O
Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P
R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q
S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R
T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S
U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T
V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U
W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V
X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W
Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X
Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y

Assume that the message to be transmitted is: "To-morrow sure," and that the key-word is: "In the inn." Write the key-word and under it the message:

INTHEINNINTH
TOMORROWSURE

Then trace *downward* the I column of the top line of the square, and *horizontally* the T column at the side of the square until the two lines coincide in the letter B: the first letter of the cipher message. The N and the O yield B; the T and the M yield F; the H and the O yield V, and so on, until the completed message is:

BBFVVZBJAHKL

The translator of the cipher message simply reverses this proceeding. He knows the keyword, and he writes it above the cipher message:

INTHEINNINTH
BBFVVZBJAHKL

He traces the I column until B is reached; the *first* letter in that line, T, is the first letter of the message—and so on.

Simple! Yes, childishly simple with the keyword; and the key-word can be carried in one's

mind. Without the key-word, translation is impossible.

Harleston put down the paper and leaned back.

Altogether it was a most interesting collection, these four articles on the table. It was a pity that the cab and the sleeping horse were not among the exhibits. Number one: a lady's lace handkerchief. Number two: three American Beauty roses, somewhat the worse for wear and violent usage. Number three: a cipher message. Number four: photograph of Madame—or Mademoiselle—de Cuthbert, de Spencer, de Lotzen. There was a pretty plot behind these exhibits; a pretty plot, or he missed his guess. It might concern the United States—and it might not. It would be his duty to find out. Meanwhile, the picture stirred memories that he had thought long dead. Also it suggested possibilities. It was some years since they had matched their wits against each other, and the last time she rather won out—because all the cards were hers, as well as the *mise en scène*. And she had left——.

His thought trailed off into silence; and the silence lasted so long, and he sat so still, that the ash fell unnoticed from his cigarette; and presently

the cigarette burned itself into the tip, and to his fingers.

He tossed it into the tray and laughed quietly.

Rare days—those days of the vanished protocol and its finding! He could almost wish that they might be again; with a different *mise en scène*, and a different ending—and a different client for his. He was becoming almost sentimental—and he was too old a bird for sentiment, and quite too old at this game; which had not any sentiment about it that was not pretence and sham. Yet it was a good game—a mighty entertaining game; where one measured wits with the best, and took long chances, and played for high stakes: men's lives and a nation's honour.

He picked up the photograph and regarded it thoughtfully.

"And what are to be the stakes now, I wonder," he mused. "It's another deal of the same old cards, but who are players? If America is one, then, my lady, we shall see who will win this time—if you're in it; and I take it you are, else why this picture. Yet to induce you to break your rule and cross the Atlantic, the moving consideration must be of the utmost weight, or else it's purely

a personal matter. H-u-m! Under all the circumstances, I should say the latter is the more likely. In which event, I may not be concerned further than to return these—" with a wave of his hand toward the exhibits.

For a while longer he sat in silence, eyes half closed, lips a bit compressed; a certain sternness, that was always in his countenance, showing plainest when in reflective thought. At last, he smiled. Then he lit another cigarette, took up the letter and the photograph, and put them in the small safe standing behind an ornate screen in the corner —not, however, without another look at the calmly beautiful face.

The roses he left lie on the table; the steel safe would not preserve them in *statu quo;* moreover, he knew, or thought he knew, all that they could convey. He swung the door shut; then swung it open, and looked again at the picture—and for sometime—before he put it up and gave the knob a twirl.

"I'm sure bewitched!" he remarked, going on to his bedroom. "It's not difficult for me to understand the Duke of Lotzen. He was simply a man—and men, at the best, are queer beggars.

No woman ever understands us—and no more do we understand women. So we're both quits on that score, if we're not quite on some others." Then he raised his hands helplessly. "Oh, Lord, the petticoats, the petticoats!"

Just then the telephone rang—noisily as befits two o'clock in the morning.

"Who the devil wants me at such an hour?" he muttered.

The clang was repeated almost instantly and continued until he unhooked the receiver.

"Well!" he said sharply.

"Is that Mr. Harleston?" asked a woman's voice. A particularly soft and sweet and smiling voice, it was.

"I am Mr. Harleston," he replied courteously—the voice had done it.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Harleston!" the voice rippled. "I suppose you are rather astonished at being called up at such an unseemly hour——"

"Not at all—I'm quite used to it, mademoiselle," Harleston assured her.

"Now you're sarcastic," the voice replied again; "and, somehow, I don't like sarcasm when I'm the cause of it."

"You're the cause of it but not the object of it," he assured her. "I'm quite sure I've never met you, and just as sure that I hope to meet you—today."

"Your hope, Mr. Harleston, is also mine. But why, may I ask, do you call me mademoiselle? I'm not French."

"It's the pleasantest way to address you until I know your name."

"You might call me madame!"

"Perish the thought! I refuse to imagine you married."

"I might be a widow."

"No."

"Or even a divorcée."

"And you might be a grandmother," he added.

"Yes."

"And doing the Maxixe at the Willard, this minute."

"Yes!" she laughed.

"But you aren't; and no more are you a widow or a divorcée."

"All of which is charming of you, Mr. Harleston, but it's not exactly the business I have in hand."

"Business at two o'clock in the morning!" he exclaimed.

He had tried to place the voice, and had failed; he was becoming convinced that he had not heard it before.

"What else would justify me in disturbing you?" she asked.

"Yourself, mademoiselle. Let us continue the pleasant conversation and forget business until business hours."

"When are your business hours, Mr. Harleston —and where's your office?"

"I have no office—and my business hours depend on the business in hand."

"And the business in hand depends primarily on whether you are interested in the subject matter of the business, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I am profoundly interested, mademoiselle, in any matter that concerns you—as well as in yourself. Who would not be interested in one so impulsive—and anything so important—as to call him on the telephone at two in the morning."

"And who on his part is so gracious—and wasn't asleep," she answered.

Harleston slowly winked at the transmitter and smiled.

He thought so. What puzzled him, however, was her idea in prolonging the talk. Maybe there was not any idea in it, just a feminine notion; yet something in the very alluring softness of her voice told him otherwise.

"You guessed it," he replied. "I was not asleep. Also I might guess something in regard to your business."

"What?"

"No, no, mademoiselle! It's impertinent to guess about what does not concern me—yet."

"Delete the word 'yet,' Mr. Harleston, and substitute the idea that it was—pardon me—rather gratuitous in you to meddle in the first place."

"I don't understand," said Harleston.

"Oh, yes you do!" she trilled. "However, I'll be specific—it's time to be specific, you would say; though I might respond that you've known all along what my business is with you."

"The name of an individual is a prerequisite to the transaction of business," he interposed

"You do not know me, Mr. Harleston."

"Hence, your name?"

"When we meet, you'll know me by my voice."

"True, mademoiselle, for it's one in a million; but as yet we are not met, and you desire to talk business."

"And I'm going to talk business!" she laughed. "And I shall not give you my name—or, if you must, know me as Madame X. Are you satisfied?"

"If you are willing to be known as Madame X," he laughed back, "I haven't a word to say. Pray begin."

"Being assured now that you have never before heard my voice, and that you have it fixed sufficiently in your memory—all of which, Mr. Harleston, wasn't in the least necessary, for we shall meet today—we will proceed. Ready?"

"Ready, mademoiselle—I mean Madame X."

"What do you intend to do, sir, in regard to the incident of the deserted cab with the sleeping horse?" she asked.

"I have not determined. It depends on developments."

"You see, Mr. Harleston, you were not in the least surprised at my question."

"For a moment, a mere man may have had a clever woman's intuition," he replied.

"And, I suppose, the woman will be expected to aid developments."

"Isn't that her present intention?"

"Not at all! Her present intention is to avoid developments so far as you are concerned, and to have matters take their intended course. It's to that end that I have ventured to call you."

"What do you wish me to do, Madame X?"

"As if you did not know!" she mocked.

"I'm very dense at times," he assured her.

"Dense!" she laughed. "Shades of Talleyrand, hear the man! However, as you desire to be told, I'll tell you. I wish you to forget that you saw anything unusual on your way home this morning, and to return the articles you took from the cab."

"To the cab?" Harleston inquired.

"No, to me."

"What were the articles?"

"A sealed envelope containing a message in cipher."

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Oh, you may keep the roses, Mr. Harleston, for your reward!" she laughed.

She had not missed the handkerchief, or else she thought it of no consequence.

"Assuming, for the moment, that I have the articles in question, how are they to be gotten to you?"

"By the messenger, I shall send."

"Will you send yourself?"

"What is that to you, sir?" she trilled.

"Simply that I shall not even consider surrendering the articles, assuming that I have them, to any one but you."

"You will surrender them to *me?*" she whispered.

"I won't surrender them to any one else."

"In other words, I have a chance to get them. No one else has a chance?"

"Precisely."

"Very well, I accept. Make the appointment, Mr. Harleston."

"Will five o'clock this afternoon be convenient?"

"Perfectly—if it can't be sooner," she replied, after a momentary pause. "And the place?"

"Where you will," he answered. He wanted

her to fix it so that he could judge of her good faith.

And she understood.

"I'm not arranging to have you throttled!" she laughed. "Let us say the corridor of the Chateau —that is safe enough, isn't it?"

"Don't you know, Madame X, that Peacock Alley is one of the most dangerous places in town?"

"Not for you, Mr. Harleston," she replied. "However——"

"Oh, I'll chance it; though it's a perilous setting with one of your adorable voice—and the other things that simply must go with it."

"And lest the other things should not go with it," she added, "I'll wear three American Beauties on a black gown so that you may know me."

"Good! Peacock Alley at five," he replied and snapped up the receiver.

III

VISITORS

"THE affair promises to be quite interesting," he confided to the paper-knife, with which he was spearing tiny holes in the blotter of the pad. "Peacock Alley at five—but there are a few matters that come first."

He went straight to the safe, unlocked it, took out the photograph, the cipher message, and the handkerchief, carried these to the table and placed them in a large envelope, which he sealed and addressed to himself. Then with it, and the three American Beauties, he passed quickly into the corridor and to an adjoining apartment. There he rang the bell vigorously and long.

He was still ringing when a dishevelled figure, in blue pajamas and a scowl, opened the door.

"What the devil do you—" the disturbed one growled.

"S-h-h!" said Harleston, his finger on his lips. "Keep these for me until tomorrow, Stuart."

And crowding the roses and the envelope in the astonished man's hands, he hurried away.

The pajamaed one glared at the flowers and the envelope; then he turned and flung them into a corner of the living-room.

"Hell!" he said in disgust. "Harleston's either crazy or in love: it's the same thing anyway."

He slammed the door and went back to bed.

Harleston, chuckling, returned to his quarters; retrieved from the floor a leaf and a petal and tossed them out of the window. Then, being assured by a careful inspection of the room that there were no further traces of the roses remaining, he went to bed.

Two minutes after his head touched the pillow, he was asleep.

Presently he awoke—listening!

Some one was on the fire-escape. The passage leading to it was just at the end of his suite; more than that, one could climb over the railing, and, by a little care, reach the sill of his bedroom window. This sill was wide and offered an easy footing. If the window were up, one could easily

step inside; or, even if it were not, the catch could be slipped in a moment.

Harleston's window, however, was up—invitingly up; also the window on the passage; it was a warm night and any air was grateful.

He lay quite still and waited developments. They came from another quarter: the corridor on which his apartment opened. Someone was there.

Then the knob of his door turned; he could not distinguish it in the uncertain light, yet he knew it was turning by a peculiarly faint screech—almost so faint as to be indistinguishable. One would not notice it except at the dead of night.

The door hung a moment; then cautiously it swung back a little way, and two men entered. The moon, though now low, was sufficient to light the place faintly and to enable them to see and be seen.

For a brief interval they stood motionless. They came to life when Harleston, reaching up, pushed the electric button.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked, blinking into their levelled revolvers.

They were medium-sized men and wore evening clothes; one was about forty-five and rather in-

clined to stoutness, the other was under forty and rather slender. They were not masked, and their faces, which were strange to Harleston, were the faces of men of breeding, accustomed to affairs.

"You startled us, Mr. Harleston," the elder replied; "and you blinded us momentarily by the rush of light."

"It was thoughtless of me," Harleston returned. He waved his hand toward the chairs. "Won't you be seated, messieurs—and pardon my not arising; I'm hardly in receiving costume. May I ask whom I am entertaining."

"Certainly, sir," the elder smiled. "This is Mr. Sparrow; I am Mr. Marston. We would not have you put yourself to the inconvenience, not to mention the hazard from drafts. You're much more comfortable in bed—and we can transact our business with you quite as well so; moreover, if you will give us your word to lie quiet and not call or shoot, we shall not offer you the slightest violence."

"I'll do anything," Harleston smiled, "to be relieved of looking down those unattractive muzzles. Ah! thank you!—The chairs, gentlemen!" with a fine gesture of welcome.

"We haven't time to sit down, thank you," said Sparrow. "Time presses and we must away as quickly as possible. We shall, we sincerely hope, inconvenience you but a moment, Mr. Harleston."

"Pray take all the time you need," Harleston responded. "I've nothing to do until nine o'clock —except to sleep; and sleep is a mere incidental to me. I would much rather chat with visitors, especially those who pay me such a delightfully early morning call."

"Do you know what we came for?" Marston asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. In fact, I don't seem to recall ever having met either of you. However—you'll find cigars and cigarettes on the table in the other room. I'll be greatly obliged, if one of you will pass me a cigarette and a match."

Both men laughed; Sparrow produced his case and offered it to Harleston, together with a match.

"Thank you, very much," said Harleston, as he struck the match and carefully passed the flame across the tip. "Now, sirs, I'm at your service. To what, or to whom, do I owe the honour of this visit?"

"We have ventured to intrude on you, Mr. Harleston," said Marston, "in regard to a little matter that happened on Eighteenth Street near Massachusetts Avenue shortly before one o'clock this morning."

Harleston looked his surprise.

"Yes!" he inflected. "How very interesting."

"I'm delighted that you find it so," was the answer. "It encourages me to go deeper into that matter."

"By all means!" said Harleston, pushing the pillow aside and sitting up. "Pray, proceed. I'm all attention."

"Then we'll go straight to the point. You found certain articles in the cab, Mr. Harleston —we have come for those articles."

"I am quite at a loss to understand," Harleston replied. "Cab—articles! Have they to do with your little matter of Eighteenth and Massachusetts Avenue several hours ago?"

"They are the crux of the matter," Marston said shortly. "And you will confer a great favour upon persons high in authority of a friendly power if you will return the articles in question."

"My dear sir," Harleston exclaimed, "I haven't

the articles, whatever they may be; and pardon me, even if I had, I should not deliver them to you; I've never, to the best of my recollection, seen either of you gentlemen before this pleasant occasion."

"My dear Mr. Harleston," remarked Sparrow, "all your actions at the cab of the sleeping horse were observed and noted, so why protest?"

"I'm not protesting; I'm simply stating two pertinent facts!" Harleston laughed.

"We will grant the fact that you've never seen us," said Marston, "but that you have not got the articles in question, we," with apologizing gesture, "beg leave to doubt."

"You're at full liberty to search my apartment," Harleston answered. "I'm not sensitive early in the morning, whatever I may be at night."

"The letter is easy to conceal," was the reply, "and the safe yonder is an *impasse* without your assistance."

"The safe is not locked," Harleston remarked. "I think I neglected to turn the knob. If you will——"

"Don't disturb yourself, I pray," was the quick

reply, the revolver glinting in his hand; "we will gladly relieve you of the trouble."

"I was only about to say that if you try the door it will open for you," Harleston chuckled. "Go through it, sir," he remarked to the younger, "and don't, I beg of you, disturb the papers more than necessary. The key to the locked drawer is in the lower compartment on the right. Proceed, my elderly friend, to search the apartment; I'll not balk you. The thing's rather amusing—and entirely absurd. If it were not—if it didn't strike my funny-bone—I should probably put up some sort of a fight; as it is, you see I'm entirely acquiescent. Your tiny automatics didn't in the least intimidate me. I could have landed you both as you entered. I've got a gun of a much larger calibre right to my hand. See!" and he lifted the pillow and exposed a 38. "Want to borrow it?"

"Why didn't you land us?" Marston asked, as he took the 38.

"It wouldn't have been kind!" Harleston smiled. "When visitors come at such an hour, they deserve to be received with every attention and courtesy—particularly when they

come on a mistaken impression and a fruitless quest."

The man looked at Harleston doubtfully. Just how much of this was bluff, he could not decide. Harleston's whole conduct was rather unusual—the open door, the open safe, the unemployed revolver, were not in accordance with the game they were playing. He should have made a fight, some sort of a fight, and not——

"The letter's not in the safe," Sparrow reported.

"I didn't think it was," said the other, "but we had to make search."

"You're very welcome to look elsewhere and anywhere," Harleston interjected. "I'll trust you not to pry into matters other than the letter. By the way, whose was the letter?"

"His Majesty of Abyssinia!" was the answer.

"Taken by wireless, I presume."

"Exactly!"

"Then, why so much bother, my friend?" Harleston asked. "If you do not find it, you can get others by the same quick route."

"The King of Abyssinia never duplicates a letter."

"When," supplemented Harleston, "it has been carelessly lost in a cab."

"Just so. Therefore——"

"I repeat that I have not got the articles," said Harleston, a bit wearily, "nor are they in my apartment. You have been misinformed. I find I am getting drowsy—this thing is not as absorbing as I had thought it would be. With your permission, I'll drop off to sleep; you're welcome to continue the search. Make yourselves perfectly at home, sirs." He lay back and drew up the sheet. "Just pull the door shut when you depart, please," he said, and closed his eyes.

"You're a queer chap," remarked Sparrow, pausing in his search and surveying Harleston with a puzzled smile. "One would suppose you're used to receiving interruptions at such hours for such purposes."

"I try never to be surprised at anything however *outré*," Harleston explained. "Good-night."

The two men looked at the recumbent figure and then at each other and laughed.

"He acts the part," said the elder. "Have you found anything?"

"Nothing! It's not in the safe nor the writing-

table—nor anywhere else that is reasonable. I've been through everything and there's nothing doing."

"You're not going?" Harleston remarked.

"You're asleep, Mr. Harleston!" Marston reminded. "The letter is here: we've simply got to find it."

"A letter is easy to conceal," the younger replied. "There's nothing but to overturn everything in the place—and so on; and that will require a day."

"So that you replace things, I've not the slightest objection," Harleston interjected. "Bang away, sirs, bang away! Anything to relieve me from suspicion."

"It prevents him from sleeping!" Sparrow laughed.

"Also yourselves," Harleston supplemented. "However, you for it, remembering that cock-crow comes earlier now than in December, and the people too are up betimes. You risk interruption, I fear, from my solicitous friends."

And even as he spoke the corridor door opened and a man stepped in.

From where he lay, Harleston could see him; the others could not.

"'Pon my soul, I'm popular this morning!" Harleston remarked, sitting up.

Instantly the new-comer covered him with his revolver.

"What did you say?" Sparrow inquired from the sitting-room, just as the stranger appeared around the corner.

Like a flash, the latter's revolver shifted to him.

"Easy there!" said he.

Sparrow sprang up—then he laughed.

"Easy yourself!" said he. "Marston, let this gentleman see your hand."

Marston came slowly forward until he stood a little behind but sufficiently in view to enable the stranger to see that he himself was covered by an automatic.

"For heaven's sake, Crenshaw," said Sparrow, "don't let us get to shooting here! If you wing me, Marston will wing you, and we'll only stir up a mess for ourselves."

"Then hand over the letter," said Crenshaw.

"Do you fancy we would be hunting it if we had it?"

"I don't fancy—produce the goods!"

"We haven't the goods," Marston shrugged. "We can't find it."

Sparrow shook his head curtly.

"It's the truth," Harleston interjected. "They haven't found the goods for the very good reason that the goods are not here. Plunge in and aid in the search; I wish you would; it will relieve me of your triple intrusion in one third less time. I'm becoming very tired of it all; it has lost its novelty. I prefer to sleep."

"I want the letter!" Crenshaw exclaimed.

"I assumed as much from the vigour of your quest," Harleston shrugged. "The difficulty is that I haven't the letter. Neither is it in my apartment. But you'll facilitate the search if you'll depress your respective cannon from the angle of each other's anatomy and get to work. As I remarked before, I'm anxious to compose myself for sleep. You can hold your little dispute later on the sidewalk, or in jail, or wherever is most convenient."

"Mr. Harleston," said Marston, "do you give us your word that the letter is not in your apartment?"

"You already have it," Harleston replied wearily.

"Then, sir, we'll take your word and withdraw."

"Thank you," said Harleston.

"He has it somewhere!" Crenshaw declared, fingering his revolver.

"My dear fellow," Marston returned, "we are willing to accept Mr. Harleston's averment."

"He knows where it is—he took it—let him tell where it is hidden."

"What good will that subserve? We can't get it tonight, and tomorrow will be too late."

"And all because of you two meddlers."

"Three meddlers, Crenshaw!" Marston laughed. "You must not forget your sweet self. We've bungled the affair, I admit. We can't improve it now by murdering each other——"

"We can make it very uncomfortable for the fourth meddler," Crenshaw threatened, eyeing the figure on the bed.

"Haven't you made me uncomfortable enough by this untimely intrusion?" Harleston muttered sleepily.

"What is your idea in not offering any opposition?" Crenshaw demanded. "Is it a plant?"

"It was courtesy at first, and the novelty of the experience; but it's ceased to be novel, and cour-

tesy is a bit supererogatory. By the way, which of you came up the fire-escape?"

The three shook their heads.

"I'm not a burglar," Crenshaw snapped.

"The burden is on you to prove it, my friend!" Harleston smiled. "However, it's no matter. Just drop cards before you leave so that I can return your call. Once more, good-night!"

"I'm off," said Marston. "Come along, Crenshaw, you can't do anything more here, and we'll all forget and forgive and start fresh in the morning."

"Start?" cried Crenshaw; "what for—home? I tell you the letter is here—he took it, didn't he? He was at the cab."

"Will you also give your word that you didn't take a letter from the cab?" Crenshaw demanded, turning upon Harleston.

"I'll give you nothing since you've asked me in that manner," Harleston replied sharply; "unless you want this." His hand came from under the sheet, and Crenshaw was looking into a levelled 38. Harleston had a pair of them.

"Beat it, my man!" Harleston snapped. "None of you are of much success as burglars; you're

not familiar with the trade. You're novices, rank novices. Also myself. I'll give you until I count five, Crenshaw, to make your adieux. One . . . two . . . No need for you two to hurry away—the time limit applies only to Mr. Crenshaw."

"It's quite time we were going, Mr. Harleston," Marston answered. "Good-night, sir—and pleasant dreams. Come on, Crenshaw."

"Three . . . four . . . "

Crenshaw made a gesture of final threat.

"Meddler!" he exclaimed. Then he followed the other two.

IV

CRENSHAW

HARLESTON lay for a few minutes, brows drawn in thought; then he arose, crossed to the telephone, and took down the receiver.

"Good-morning, Miss Williams," he said. "Has it been a long night?"

"Pretty long, Mr. Harleston," the girl answered. "There hasn't been a thing doing for two hours."

"Haven't three gentlemen just left the building?"

"No one has passed in or out since you came in, Mr. Harleston."

"Then I must be mistaken."

"You certainly are. It's so lonely down here, Mr. Harleston, you can pick up chunks of it and carry off."

"Been asleep?"

"I don't think!" she laughed. "I'm not minded to lose my job. Suppose some peevish

woman wanted a doctor and she couldn't raise me; do you think I'd last longer than the morning and the manager's arrival? Nay! Nay!"

"It's an unsympathetic world, isn't it, Miss Williams?"

"Only when you're down—otherwise it's not half bad. Say, maybe here's one of your men now; he's walking down. Shall I stop him?"

"No, no, let him go. When he's gone, tell me if he's slender, or stout, or has a moustache and imperial."

"Sure, I will."

Through the telephone Harleston could hear someone descend the stairs, cross the lobby, and the revolving doors swing around.

The next moment, the operator's voice came with a bit of laugh.

"Are you there, Mr. Harleston?"

"I'm here."

"Well, your man was a woman—and she was accidentally deliberately careful that I shouldn't see her face."

"H-u-m!" said Harleston. "Young or old?"

"She's got ripples enough on her gown to be sixty, and figure enough to be twenty."

"Slender?"

"Yes; a perfect peach!"

"How's her walk?"

"As if the ground was all hers."

"I see!" Harleston replied. "What would you, as a woman, make her age—being indifferent and strictly truthful?"

"Not over twenty-eight—probably less!" she laughed. "And I've a notion she's some to look at, Mr. Harleston."

"You mean she's a beauty?"

"Sure."

"Call me if she comes back; also if any of the men go out. They are strangers to the Collingwood, so you will know them."

"Very good, Mr. Harleston."

He hung up the receiver and went back to bed.

If no one had come in and no one had left the Collingwood since his return, the men must have been in the building—unless they had come by another way than the main entrance; which was the only entrance open after midnight. If the former was the case, then someone on the outside must have communicated to them as to him.

With a muttered curse on his stupidity, he returned to the telephone.

"Miss Williams," said he, "there has been a queer occurrence in the building since two A.M., and I should like to know confidentially whether any one has communicated with an apartment since one thirty."

The girl knew that Harleston was on intimate terms with the State Department, and with the police, and she answered at once.

"Save only yours, not a single in or out call has been registered since twelve fifty-two when apartment No. 401 was connected for a short while."

"Who has No. 401?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Chartrand. It's one of the transient apartments; and they have occupied it only a few days."

"You didn't by any chance overhear——"

"The conversation?" she laughed. "Sure, I heard it; anything to put in the time during the night. It was very brief, however; something about him being here, and to meet him at ten in the morning."

"Who were talking?"

"Mrs. Chartrand and a man—at least I took it to be Mrs. Chartrand; it was a woman's voice."

"Did they mention where they were to meet, or the name of the man?"

"No. The very vagueness of the talk made its impression on me at that time of night. In the daytime, I would not have even listened."

"I understand," said Harleston. "Call me up, will you, if there are any developments as to the men I've described—or the conversation. Meanwhile, Miss Williams, not a word."

"Not a word, Mr. Harleston—and thank you."

"What for?"

"For treating me as a human being. Most persons treat me like an automaton or a bit of dirt. You're different; most of the men are not so bad; it's the women, Mr. Harleston, the women! Good-night, sir. I'll call you if anything turns up."

"All of which shows," reflected Harleston, as he returned to bed, "that the telephone people are right in asking you to smile when you say 'hello.' "

It was a very interesting condition of affairs that confronted him.

The episode of the cab of the sleeping horse was leading on to—what?

Three men in the Collingwood knew of the occurrence, yet no one had come in or gone out, and no one had telephoned. Moreover, they also knew of Harleston's part in the matter. The girl had not lied, he was sure; therefore they must have gained entrance from the outside; and, possibly, were now hiding in the Chartrand apartment—if the telephone message to No. 401 had to do with the occupant of the deserted cab and the lost letter. Yet how to connect things? And why bother to connect them?

He did not care for the vanished lady of the cab—he had the letter and the photograph; and because of them he was to have a talk with an interesting young woman at five o'clock that afternoon. The cipher letter, which was the much desired quantity, was safely across the hall, waiting to be turned over to Carpenter, the expert of the State Department, for translation. Meanwhile, what concerned Harleston was the photograph of Madeline Spencer and her connection with the case—and to know if the United States was concerned in the affair.

At this point he turned over and calmly went to sleep. Tomorrow was another day.

He was aroused by a vigorous pounding on the corridor door. It was seven-thirty o'clock. He yawned and responded to the summons—which grew more insistent with every pound.

It was Stuart—the envelope and the flowers in his hand.

"Scarcely heard your gentle tap," Harleston remarked. "Why don't you knock like a man?"

"Here's your damn bouquet, also your envelope," said Stuart. "You probably don't recall that you left them with me about two this morning. I *do*."

"I'm mighty much obliged, old man," Harleston responded. "You did me a great service by taking them—I'll tell you about it later."

"Hump!" grunted Stuart. "I hope you'll come around to tell me at a more seasonable hour. So long!"

Harleston closed the door, and was half-way across the living-room when there came another knock.

Tossing the envelope and the faded roses on a

nearby table, he stepped back and swung open the door.

Instantly, a revolver was shoved into his face, and Crenshaw sprang into the hall and closed the door.

"I thought as much!" he exclaimed. "I'll take that envelope, my friend, and be quick about it."

"What envelope?" Harleston inquired pleasantly, never seeming to notice the menacing automatic.

"Come, no trifling!" Crenshaw snapped. "The envelope that the man from the apartment across the corridor just handed you."

Harleston laughed. "You are obsessed with the notion that I have something of yours, Mr. Crenshaw."

"*The letter!*" exclaimed Crenshaw.

"That envelope is addressed to me, sir; it's not the one you seem to want."

"I suppose the flowers are also addressed to you," Crenshaw derided, advancing. "Get back, sir,—I'll get the envelope myself."

"My dear man," Harleston expostulated, retreating slowly toward the door of the living-room,

"I'll let you see the envelope; I've not the slightest objection. Put up your gun, man; I'm not dangerous."

"You're not so long as I've got the drop on you!" Crenshaw laughed sneeringly. "Get back, man, get back; to the far side of the table—the far side, do you hear—while I examine the envelope yonder beside the roses. The roses are very familiar, Mr. Harleston. I've seen them before."

Harleston, retreating hastily, backed into a chair and fell over it.

"All right, stay there, then!" said Crenshaw, and reached for the letter.

As he did so, Harleston's slippered foot shot out and drove hard into the other's stomach. With a grunt Crenshaw doubled up from pain. The next instant, Harleston caught his wrist and the struggle was on.

It was not for long, however. Crenshaw was outweighed and outstrengthed; and Harleston quickly bore him to the floor, where a sharp blow on the fingers sent the automatic flying.

"If it were not for spoiling the devil's handiwork, my fine friend, I'd smash your face," Harleston remarked.

"Smash it!" the other panted. "I'll promise —to smash yours—at the first opportunity."

"Which latter smashing won't be until some years later," Harleston retorted, as he turned Crenshaw over. Bearing on him with all his weight, he loosed his own pajama-cord and tied the man's hands behind him. Next he kicked off his pajama trousers, and with them bound Crenshaw's ankles. Then he dragged him to a chair and plunked him into it, securing him there by a strap.

"It's scarcely necessary to gag you," he remarked pleasantly. "In your case, an outcry would be embarrassing only to yourself."

"What do you intend to do with me?" Crenshaw demanded.

"Ultimately, you mean. I have not decided. It may depend on what I find."

"Find?"

Harleston nodded. "In your pockets."

"You dog!" Crenshaw burst out, straining at his bonds. "You miserable whelp! What do you think to find?"

"I'm not thinking," Harleston smiled; "it isn't necessary to speculate when one has all the stock, you know." Then his face hardened.

"One who comes into another's residence in the dead of night, revolver in hand and violence in his intention, can expect no mercy and should receive none. You're an ordinary burglar, Crenshaw; and as such the law will view you if I turn you over to the police. You think I found a letter in an abandoned cab at 18th and Massachusetts Avenue early this morning, and instead of coming like a respectable man and asking if I have it and proving your property—do you hear, proving *your* property—you play the burglar and highwayman. Evidently the letter isn't yours, and you haven't any right or claim to it. I have been injected into this matter; and having been injected I intend to ascertain what can be found from your papers. Who you are; what your object; who are concerned beside yourself; and anything else I can discover. You see, you have the advantage of me; you know who I am, and, I presume, my business; I know nothing of you, nor of your business, nor what this all means; though I might guess some things. It's to obviate guessing, as far as possible, that I am about to examine such evidence as you may have with you."

Crenshaw was so choked with his anger that for a moment he merely sputtered—then he relapsed into furious silence, his dark eyes glowing with such hate that Harleston paused and asked a bit curiously:

"Why do you take it so hard? It's all in the game—and you've lost. You're a poor sort of sport, Crenshaw. You'd be better at ping-pong or croquet. This matter of—letters, and cabs, is far beyond your calibre; it's not in your class."

"We haven't reached the end of the matter, my adroit friend," gritted Crenshaw. "My turn will come, never fear."

"A far day, monsieur, a far day!" said Harleston lightly. "Meanwhile, with your permission, we will have a look at the contents of your pockets. First, your pocketbook."

He unbuttoned the other's coat, put in his hand, and drew out the book.

"Attend, please," said he, "so you can see that I replace every article."

Crenshaw's only answer was a contemptuous shrug.

A goodly wad of yellow backs of large denominations, and some visiting cards, no two of which

bore the same name, were the contents of the pocketbook.

"You must have had some difficulty in keeping track of yourself," Harleston remarked, as he made a note of the names.

Then he returned the bills and the cards to the book, and put it back in Crenshaw's pocket.

"It's unwise to carry so much money about you," he remarked; "it induces spending, as well as provokes attack."

"What's that to you?" replied Crenshaw angrily.

"Nothing whatever—it's merely a word of advice to one who seems to need it. Now for the other pockets."

The coat yielded nothing additional; the waistcoat, only a few matches and an open-faced gold watch, which Harleston inspected rather carefully both inside and out; the trousers, a couple of handkerchiefs with the initial C in the corner, some silver, and a small bunch of keys—and in the fob pocket a crumpled note, with the odour of carnations clinging to it.

Harleston glanced at Crenshaw as he opened the note—and caught a sly look in his eyes.

"Something doing, Crenshaw?" he queried.

Another shrug was Crenshaw's answer—and the sly look grew into a sly smile.

The note, apparently in a woman's handwriting, was in French, and contained five words and an initial:

À l'aube du jour.
M.

Harleston looked at it long enough to fix in his mind the penmanship and to mark the little eccentricities of style. Then he folded it and put it in Crenshaw's outside pocket.

"Thank you!" said he, with an amused smile.

"You forgot to look in the soles of my shoes?" Crenshaw jeered.

"Someone else will do that," Harleston replied.

"Someone else?" Crenshaw inflected.

"The police always search prisoners, I believe."

"My God, you don't intend to turn me over to the police?" Crenshaw exclaimed.

"Why not?" And when Crenshaw did not reply: "Wherein are you different from any other

felon taken red-handed—except that you were taken twice in the same night, indeed?"

"Think of the scandal that will ensue!" Crenshaw cried.

"It won't affect me!" Harleston laughed.

"Won't affect you?" the other retorted. "Maybe it won't—and maybe it will!"

"We shall try it," Harleston remarked, and picked up the telephone.

Crenshaw watched him with a snarling sneer on his lips.

Harleston gave the private number of the police superintendent. He himself answered.

"Major Ranleigh, this is Harleston. I'd like to have a man report to me at the Collingwood at once.—No; one will be enough, thank you. Have him come right up to my apartment. Good-bye! —Now if you'll excuse me for a brief time, Mr. Crenshaw, I'll get into some clothes—while you think over the question whether you will explain or go to prison."

"You will not dare!" Crenshaw laughed mockingly. "Your State Department won't stand for it a moment when they hear of it—which they'll do at ten o'clock, if I'm missing."

"Let me felicitate you on your forehandedness," Harleston called from the next room. "It's admirably planned, but not effective for your release."

"Hell!" snorted Crenshaw, and relapsed into silence.

Presently Harleston appeared, dressed for the morning.

"Why not spread your cards on the table, Crenshaw?" he asked. "I did stumble on the deserted cab this morning, wholly by accident; I was on my way here. I did find in it a letter and these roses, and I brought them here. I don't know if you know what that letter contained—I do. It's in cipher—and will be turned over to the State Department for translation. What I want to know is: first—what is the message of the letter, if you know; second—who was the woman in the cab, and the facts of the episode; third—what governments, if any, are concerned."

"You're amazingly moderate in your demands," Crenshaw sarcasmed; "so moderate, indeed, that I would acquiesce at once but for the fact that I'm wholly ignorant of the contents of the letter. The name of the woman, and the episode of the cab

are none of your affair; nor do the names of parties, whether personal or government, concern you in the least."

"Very well. We'll close up the cards and play the game. The first thing in the game, as I said a moment ago, Crenshaw, is not to squeal when you are in a hole and losing."

A knock came at the door. Harleston crossed and swung it open.

A young man—presumably a business man, quietly-dressed—stood at attention and saluted. If he saw the bound man in the chair, his eyes never showed it.

"Ah, Whiteside," Harleston remarked. "I'm glad it is you who was sent. Come in. . . . You will remain here and guard this man; you will prevent any attempt at escape or rescue, even though you are obliged to use the utmost force. I'm for down-town now; and I will communicate with you at the earliest moment. Meanwhile, the man is in your charge."

"Yes, Mr. Harleston!" Whiteside answered.

"I want some breakfast!" snapped Crenshaw.

"The officer will order from the café whatever you wish," Harleston replied; and picking up his

stick he departed, the letter and the photograph in the sealed envelope in his inside pocket.

As he went out, he smiled pleasantly at Crenshaw.

V

ANOTHER WOMAN

HARLESTON walked down Sixteenth Street—the Avenue of the Presidents, if you have time either to say it or write it. The Secretary of State resided on it, and, as chance had it, he was descending the front steps as Harleston came along.

Now the Secretary was duly impressed with all the dignity of his official position, and he rarely failed to pull it on the ordinary individual—cockey would be about the proper term. In Harleston, however, he recognized an unusual personage; one to whom the Department was wont to turn when all others had failed in its diplomatic problems; who had some wealth and an absolutely secure social position; who accepted no pecuniary recompense for his service, doing it all for pure amusement, and because his government requested it.

"It's too fine a day to ride to the Department,"

said the Secretary. "It's much too fine, really, to go anywhere except to the Ratoplan and play golf."

Harleston agreed.

"I'll take you on at four o'clock," the Secretary suggested.

"If that is not a command," said Harleston, "I should like first to consult you about a matter which arose last night, or rather early this morning. I was bound for your office now. I can, however, give you the main facts as we go along."

"Proceed!" said the Secretary. "I'm all attention."

"It may be of grave importance and it may be of very little——"

"What do you think it is?"

"I think it is of first importance, judging from known facts. If Carpenter can translate the cipher message, it will——"

"The Department has full faith in your diagnosis, Harleston. You're the surgeon; you prescribe the treatment and I'll see that it is followed. Now drive on with the story."

"It begins with a letter, a photograph, a hand-

kerchief, three American Beauty roses—all in the cab of the sleeping horse——"

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the Secretary.

"——at one o'clock on Massachusetts Avenue and Eighteenth Street."

"Is the horse still asleep, Harleston?"

"The horse awoke, and straightway went to his stand in Dupont Circle!" Harleston laughed and related the incidents of the night and early morning, finishing his account in the Secretary's private office.

"Most amazing!" the latter reflected, eyes half-closed as though seeing a mental picture of it all.

Then he picked up the photograph and studied it awhile.

"So this is the wonderful Madeline Spencer—who came so near to throwing our friend, the King of Valeria, out of his Archdukeship, and later from his throne. I remember the matter most distinctly. I was a friend of the Dalberg family of the Eastern Shore, and of Armand Dalberg himself." He paused, and looked again at the picture. "H-u-m! She is a very beautiful woman, Harleston, a very beautiful woman! I think I have never seen her

equal; certainly never her superior. These dark-haired, classic featured ones for me, Harleston; the pale blonde type does not appeal. The peroxides come of that class." Again the photograph did duty. "I could almost wish that she were the lost lady of the cab of the sleeping horse—so that I might see her in the flesh. I've never seen her, you know."

Harleston smoothed back a smile. The Secretary too was getting sentimental over the lady, and he had never seen her; though he had known of her rare doings; and those doings had, it appeared, had their natural effect of enveloping her in a glamour of fascination because of what she had done.

"You've seen her?" the Secretary asked.

"I've known her since she was Madeline Cuthbert. Since then she's had a history. Possibly, taken altogether she's a pretty bad lot. And she is not only beautiful; she's fascinating, simply fascinating; it's a rare man, a very rare man, who can be with her ten minutes and not succumb to her manifold attractions of mind and body."

"You have succumbed?" the Secretary smiled.

"I have—twenty times at least. You'll join

the throng, if she has occasion to need you, and gives you half a chance."

"I'm married!" said the Secretary.

"I'm quite aware of it!"

"I'm immune!"

"And yet you're wishing to see her in the flesh!" Harleston smiled.

"I think I can safely take the risk!" smoothing his chin complacently.

"Other men have thought the same, I believe, and been burned. However, if the lady is in Washington I'll engage that you meet her. Also, I'll acquaint her of your boasted immunity from her *beaux yeux*."

"The latter isn't within the scope of your duty, sir," the Secretary smiled. "Now we'll have Carpenter."

He touched a button.

A moment later Carpenter entered; a scholarly-looking man in the fifties; bald as an egg, with the quiet dignity of bearing which goes with a student, who at the same time is an expert in his particular line—and knows it. He was the Fifth Assistant-Secretary, had been the Fifth Assistant and Chief of the Cipher Division for years. His superior

was not to be found in any capital in Europe. His business with the secret service of the Department was to pull the strings and obtain results; and he got results, else he would not have been continued in office. His specialty, however, was ciphers; and his chief joy was in a case that had a cipher at the bottom. Ciphers were his recreation, as well as his business.

The Secretary with a gesture turned him over to Harleston—and Harleston handed him the letter.

"What do you make out of it, Mr. Carpenter?" he asked.

Carpenter took the letter and examined it for a moment, holding it to the light, and carefully feeling its texture.

"Not a great deal cursorily," he answered. "It's a French paper—the sort, I think, used at the Quay d'Orsay. Have you the envelope accompanying it?"

"Here it is!" said Harleston.

"This envelope, however, is not French; it's English," Carpenter said instantly. "See! a saltire within an orle is the private water-mark of Sergeant & Co. I likely can tell you more after careful examination in my workshop."

"How about the message itself?" Harleston asked.

"It is the Vigenèrie cipher, that's reasonably certain; and, as you are aware, Mr. Harleston, the Vigenèrie is practically impossible of solution without the key-word. It is the one cipher that needs no code-book, nor anything else that can be lost or stolen—the code-word can be carried in one's mind. We used it in the De la Porte affair, you will remember. Indeed, just because of its simplicity it is used more generally by every nation than any other cipher."

"I thought that you might be able to work it out," said Harleston. "You can do it if any one on earth can."

"I can do some things, Mr. Harleston," smiled Carpenter deprecatingly, "but I'm not omniscient. For instance: What language is the key-word—French, Italian, Spanish, English? The message is written on French paper, enclosed in an English envelope.—However, the facts you have may clear up that phase of the matter."

"Here are the facts, as I know them," said Harleston.

Carpenter leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and listened.

. . . . . .

"The message is, I should confidently say, written in English or French, with the chances much in favour of the latter," he said, when Harleston had concluded. "Everyone concerned is English or American; the men who descended upon you so peculiarly and foolishly, and who showed their inexperience in every move, were Americans, I take it, as was also the woman who telephoned you. Moreover, she is fighting them."

"Then your idea is that the United States is not concerned in the matter?" the Secretary asked.

"Not directly, yet it may be very much concerned in the result. We will know more about it after Mr. Harleston has had his interview with the lady."

"That's so!" the Secretary reflected. "We shall trust you, Harleston, to find out something definite from her. Keep me advised if anything turns up. It seems peculiar, and it may be only a personal matter and not an *affaire d'état.* At all events, you've a pleasant interview before you."

"Maybe I have—and maybe I haven't!"

Harleston laughed—and he and Carpenter went out, passing the French Ambassador in the anteroom.

Harleston went straight to Police Headquarters. The Chief was waiting for him.

"I had Thompson, your cab driver, here," said Ranleigh, "and he tells a somewhat unusual but apparently straight tale; moreover, he is a very respectable negro, well known to the guards and the officers on duty around Dupont Circle, and they regard him as entirely trustworthy. He says that last evening about nine o'clock, when he was jogging down Connecticut Avenue on his way home—he owns his rig—he was hailed by a fare in evening dress, top coat, and hat, who directed him to drive west on Massachusetts Avenue. In the neighbourhood of Twenty-second Street, the fare signalled to stop and ordered him to come to the door. There he asked him to hire the horse and cab until this morning, when they would be returned to him at that point. Thompson naturally demurred; whereupon the man offered to deposit with him in cash the value of the horse and cab, to be refunded upon their return in the morning, less fifty dollars for their hire. This was too

good to let slip and Thompson acquiesced, fixing the value at three hundred and fifty dollars, which sum the man skinned off a roll of yellow-backs. Then the fare buttoned his coat around him, jumped on the box, and drove east on Massachusetts Avenue. This morning the horse and cab were backed up to the curb at their customary stand in Dupont Circle, where they were found by officer Murphy shortly after daybreak; before he could report the absence of the driver, Thompson came up and explained."

"Can Thompson describe the man?" Harleston asked.

"Merely that he was clean-shaved, medium-sized, somewhat stout, wore evening clothes, and was, apparently, a gentleman. Thompson thinks however, that he could readily recognize the man, so we should let him have a look at the fellow that's under guard in your apartment."

"It isn't he," Harleston explained. "He's slender, with a mustache and imperial. It was Marston, likely. Did any of your officers see cab No. 333 between nine P.M. and this morning?"

"The reports are clean of No. 333, but we are investigating now. It's not likely, however.

Meanwhile, if there is anything else I can do, Mr. Harleston——"

"You can listen to the balance of the episode—beginning at half-past one this morning, when I found the cab deserted at Eighteenth Street and Massachusetts Avenue, with the horse lying in the roadway, asleep in the shafts. . . ."

"What do you wish the police to do, Mr. Harleston?" the Superintendent asked at the end.

"Nothing, until I've seen the Lady of Peacock Alley. Then I'll likely know something definite—whether to keep hands off or to get busy."

"Shan't we even try to locate the two men, in preparation for your getting busy?"

"H'm!" reflected Harleston. "Do it very quietly then. You see, I don't know whom you're likely to locate, nor whether we want to locate them."

"The men who visited your apartment are not of the profession, Mr. Harleston."

"It's their profession that's bothering me!" Harleston laughed. "Why are three Americans engaged in what bears every appearance of being a diplomatic matter, and of which our State Department knows nothing?"

"There's a woman in it, I believe; likely two, possibly three!" was the smiling reply.

"Hump!" said Harleston. "A woman is at the bottom of most things, that's a fact; she's about the only thing for which a man will betray his country. However, as they're three men there should be three women——"

"One woman is enough—if she is sufficiently fascinating and plays the men off against one another. Though you've plenty of women in the case, Mr. Harleston, if you're looking for the three:—the one whom you're to meet this afternoon; the unknown who left the Collingwood so mysteriously; and the one of the photograph. If the other two are as lovely as she of the photograph they are some trio. I shouldn't care for the latter lady to tempt me overlong."

"Wise man!" Harleston remarked, as he arose to go. "I'll advise you after the interview. Meanwhile you might have the cabby look at the fellow in durance at the Collingwood. Possibly he has seen him before; which may give us a lead—if we find we want a lead."

The telephone buzzed; Ranleigh answered it—then raised his hand to Harleston to remain.

After a moment, he motioned for Harleston to come closer and held the receiver so that both could hear.

"I can see you at three o'clock," Ranleigh said.

"Three o'clock will be very nice," came a feminine voice—soft, with a bit of a drawl.

"Very well," Ranleigh replied. "If you will give me your name—I missed it. Whom am I to expect at three?"

"Mrs. Winton, of the Burlingame apartments. I'll be punctual—and thank you so much. Good-bye!"

"Anything familiar about the voice?" Ranleigh asked, pushing back the instrument.

Harleston shook his head in negation.

"I thought it might be your Lady of Peacock Alley, for it's about the cab matter. She says that she has something to tell me regarding a mysterious cab on Eighteenth Street last night sometime about one o'clock."

"There are quite too many women in this affair," Harleston commented. "However, the Burlingame is almost directly across the street from where I found the cab, so her story will be interesting—if it's not a plant."

"And it may be even more interesting if it is

a plant," Ranleigh added. "If you will come in a bit before three, I'll put you where you can see and hear everything that takes place."

"I'll do it!" said Harleston.

VI

THE GREY-STONE HOUSE

HARLESTON returned at a quarter to three, and Ranleigh showed him into the small room at the rear, provided with every facility for seeing what went on and overhearing and reducing what was said in the Superintendent's private office.

Promptly at three, Mrs. Winton was announced by appointment, and was instantly admitted.

She was about thirty years of age, slender, with dark hair and a face just missing beauty. She was gowned in black, with a bunch of violets at her waist, and she wore a large mesh veil, through which her particularly fine dark eyes sparkled discriminatingly.

The Superintendent arose and bowed graciously. Ranleigh was a gentleman by birth and by breeding.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Winton?" he

asked, placing a chair for her—where her face would be in full view from the cabinet.

"You can do nothing for me, sir," she replied, with a charming smile. "I came to you as head of the Police Department for the purpose of detailing what I saw in connection with the matter I mentioned to you over the telephone. It may be of no value to you—I even may do wrong in volunteering my information, but——"

"On the contrary," the Superintendent interjected, "you confer a great favour on this Department by reporting to it any suspicious circumstances. It is for it to investigate and determine whether they call for action. Pray proceed, my dear Mrs. Winton."

She gave him another charming smile and went on.

"I was out last evening, and it was after midnight when I got back to the Burlingame. My apartment is on the third floor front. Instead of going to bed at once, I sat down at the open window to enjoy the gentle breeze. I must have dozed, for I was aroused by a cab coming up Eighteenth and stopping before the large, grey-stone house opposite—the rest of the houses are

brick—which was unoccupied until two days ago, when it was rented furnished. I live just across the street and hence I notice these things—casually, of course, as one does. I watched the cab with languid interest; saw the driver descend from the box, which seemed a bit peculiar; but when, instead of going to the door of the cab, he went up the front steps and into the house—the door of which he opened with a key that he took from his pocket—my curiosity was aroused. A moment later, a man in evening dress came leisurely out and sauntered to the carriage. It seemed to me he was interested in looking around him, and at the houses opposite, rather than at the cab. He remained at the cab, presumably in talk with those within, for several minutes. Presently the door clicked and a woman stepped out, followed by a man. The woman disappeared into the house. The two men drew in so close to the cab that they were hidden from me; when they reappeared, they were carrying a woman—or her body—between them. They hurriedly crossed the sidewalk, mounted the steps, and the house-door closed behind them instantly. The noise of the door seemed to arouse the horse, doubtless he took it

for the door of the cab, and he started slowly up the street toward Massachusetts Avenue. After walking a short distance, and in front of a vacant lot near the corner, he halted—obviously he realized that no one was holding the lines, and he was waiting for his driver to return. Just then one of the men put his head out of the doorway, saw that the horse was no longer before the house, and dodged quickly back. I waited for further developments from the house. None came, except that in one of the rooms a light was made, but it was behind closed shades. Pretty soon the horse calmly lay down in the shafts, stretched out, and apparently went to sleep. Disturbed by the occurrence, and debating what I ought to do, I sat a while longer; and I must have dozed again, for when I awoke the house was dark, and a man, a strange man, I think, was standing beside the cab, and the horse was up. The man was gathering the reins; he fastened them to the driver's seat, spoke to the horse, and the horse moved off and into Massachusetts Avenue toward Dupont Circle. The man watched him for a moment; then turned and went down Massachusetts Avenue. After waiting a short while, I went to bed. This

morning, I decided it was well for you to know of the episode."

"And you have told it wonderfully well, Mrs. Winton," said the Superintendent, "wonderfully well, indeed."

"You don't know how often I rehearsed," she laughed, "nor how much of the essentials I may have omitted!"

"Not much, I fancy. However, you'll not object, I suppose, to answering a few questions as to details."

"I wish you to ask anything that suggests itself," she replied. "I've an appointment at the Chateau at five; just give me time to keep it."

"We'll get through long before five!" the Superintendent smiled, though his shrewd grey eyes were coldly critical. It was most unlikely that she was the Lady of Peacock Alley; yet all things are possible where a woman is concerned, as he knew from experience. "About what time was it when the cab stopped before the house?" he asked.

"About one o'clock, as near as I can judge," she answered.

"What was the interval between the driver's going into the house and the man in evening clothes coming out?"

"Scarcely any interval—not more than a minute."

"Do you know how long a minute is?" said Ranleigh, drawing out his watch.

"Not exactly!" she admitted.

"Do you mind if I test you?"

"Not in the least."

"Then tell me when it is a minute. . . ."

"Now?" said she.

"Fourteen seconds!" he smiled.

"Fourteen seconds!" she exclaimed incredulously. "It's not possible."

"You're considerably above the average, Mrs. Winton. However, it depends much on what you're doing at the moment. Last night when you were watching, not estimating, you probably were nearer right as to the interval. When, may I ask, did the driver reappear?"

"He didn't reappear—at least that I saw; he may have come out of the house while I dozed."

"Might not the man that you saw last have been he?"

"I'm perfectly sure it wasn't. The driver was medium-sized and stout, this man was tall and slender. I couldn't have been mistaken."

Ranleigh nodded. Her story was testing up very well on the known points.

"Now, Mrs. Winton, can you give some description of the woman in the case—her appearance—how she was dressed—anything to aid us in identifying her?"

"I'm afraid I can't be of much help," Mrs. Winton replied. "She was, I think, clad in a dark street gown. In the uncertain electric light, I could not distinguish the colour—and the men were so close to her I had little chance to see. About all I'm sure of is that it was a woman; slender and about the average height. I did not see her face."

The Chief nodded again.

"What about the house, Mrs. Winton? Did you see anything unusual before tonight?"

"I saw no one but the servants—though I didn't look quite all the time," she added with a smile. "I'm not unduly curious, I think, Major Ranleigh, under the, to me, unusual circumstances; and in

mitigation of my curiosity, I've told no one of the matter."

"You're a woman of rare discretion, Mrs. Winton," the Superintendent replied.

"I fear I'm a busy-body," she returned.

"I wish then there were more busy-bodies of your sort. Tell me, could you recognize the men?"

"Not with any assurance.—Neither could I recognize the occupants of the house," she added. "The truth is, though you may doubt, that I scarcely notice them; but one can't see a to-let-unfurnished sign on a house opposite for six months, without remarking its sudden disappearance from the landscape."

"I should say that you wouldn't be normal if you didn't notice—and comment, too," Ranleigh declared. "And the Department is much indebted to you for the information, and it appreciates the spirit that moves you in the matter."

Mrs. Winton arose to go—the Superintendent accompanied her into the hall, rang the bell for the elevator, and bowed her into it.

"Don't you wish to know the result?" he

inquired with a quizzical smile, as he put her in the car.

"I'm not unduly curious!" she laughed.

When he returned, Harleston was standing in his office lighting a cigarette.

"It's infernally close, not to mention hot, in that cabinet of yours," he observed; "though one can see and hear."

"Ever see her before?" the Superintendent asked.

"I don't recall it!"

"Ever hear the voice?"

"No."

"What do you think of her?"

"Good to look at, truthful, sincere."

"And her story?"

"Simple statement of fact, I take it."

"Hum!" said Ranleigh.

"Which means?" Harleston asked.

"Nothing at present; may be nothing at any time. I never believe a story till its truth is established—and then I'm still in a receptive state of mind. However, it does seem true, and Mrs. Winton herself supports it; which is enough for the time."

"At any rate, we've found the lady of the cab," Harleston remarked. "Or rather we've located her as of one o'clock, which is shortly before I happened on the scene."

"Is there anything in the description that corresponds to the lady of the photograph?"

"It all corresponds; slight, above medium-height, dark gown—she affects dark gowns;—but thousands of women are slight, above medium-height, and wear dark gowns."

"At least it eliminates the very tall and the stout," Ranleigh observed. "Let me ask you, what do you make of Mrs. Winton's appointment at the Chateau at five, and her being gowned in black?"

"A mere coincidence, I think. What would be her object in telling this story to you between three and four o'clock, and meeting me at five to recover the lost document."

"Search me! I'm sure only of this: there are too many women in this affair, Mr. Harleston, too many women! Man is a reasoning being and somewhat consistent; but women—" a gesture ended the remark.

"Just so!" Harleston laughed. "And now for the Lady of Peacock Alley!"

VII

SURPRISES

PEACOCK ALLEY was in full gorgeousness when Harleston, just at five o'clock, paused on the landing above the marble stairs inside the F Street entrance and surveyed the motley throng—busy with looking and being looked at, with charming and being charmed, with wondering and being wondered at, with aping and being aped, with patronizing and being patronized, with flattering and being flattered, with fawning and being fawned upon, with deceiving and being deceived, with bluffing and being bluffed, with splurging, with pretending, with every trick and artifice and sham and chicanery that society and politics know, or can fancy.

Harleston was familiar with it all for too many years even to accord it a glance of contemptuous indifference—when he had anything else to occupy

his mind; and just now his mind was on a lady in black with three American Beauties on the gown.

He went slowly down the steps to the main corridor and joined the buzzing, kaleidoscopic crowd.

Somewhere on the floor above, an orchestra was playing for the *dansant;* and the music came fitfully through the chatter and confusion. He nodded to some acquaintances, bowed formally to others, shook hands when it could not be avoided; all the while progressing slowly down the corridor in search of three red roses on a black gown.

And near the far end he saw, for an instant through a rift in the crowd, the three roses on a black gown, but not the face above them; the next instant the rift closed. However, he knew now that she was here and where to find her, and he made his way through the press toward where she was waiting for him.

Then the crowd suddenly opened—as crowds do—and he saw, on the same side of the corridor and scarcely ten feet apart, two slender women in black and wearing red roses; one was Mrs. Winton, the other he had never seen.

It brought him to a sharp pause. Then he

smiled. Ranleigh was right! There were altogether too many women in this case. And which one was waiting for him? He knew neither, but there was the chance that the one he was to meet knew him.

And so he adventured it, walking slowly toward them, and taking care that they should notice him.

They did.

Mrs. Winton glanced at him casually and impersonally.

The unknown, whose face was from him, turned sharply when he dropped his stick, and looked at him unrecognizingly. As her eyes came down they rested on the other woman.

She gave a subdued exclamation, arose and threaded her way to the opposite side of the corridor.

Harleston, glancing back, saw the move, and swinging over he followed. He would speak to her—meanwhile, he was looking at her. So far, at least, both were good to look at; they must be good to look at in this business, it is part of the stock in trade.

"Good afternoon, Madame X," he said, bowing before her.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Harleston," she smiled, giving him her hand and making room beside her on the settee. "I'm delighted to see you, just delighted!"

"It is nice to meet again, isn't it?" he returned. "When did you get to town?"

"Only yesterday! You live in Washington, now, don't you?"

"Yes, off and on. It's my headquarters for refitting and starting afresh. What do you say to a turn at the *dansant?*"

"I'm ready, I'm sure," she replied. "Afterward we'll——"

"Discuss other matters!" he interjected.

She gave him an amused look, and they passed down the corridor and up the marble steps to the elevator.

They were dancing the *Maxixe* when they entered.

"Do you mind if we don't do it on the heels?" said she. "I think it's prettier the other way."

"So do I," said he, and they drifted down the room.

He knew almost everyone on the floor; the women nodded to him, then stared coldly at his

companion; the men too stared at her—but not coldly—and when they thought about it, which was seldom of late, nodded to him, and resumed their staring.

And Harleston did not wonder—indeed, had it been otherwise, it would have argued a sudden paucity of appreciation on the part of the smart set there assembled. For this slender young person in black, a small hat on her head, topping hair of flaming red, an exquisite figure and a charming pair of slender high-arched feet, was worth anyone's staring, be it either coldly or with frank interest. And she did not seem to know it; which in this day of smug and blatant personal appreciation of one's good points—feminine points—is something of a rarity in the sex. It may be, however, that Madame X was fully aware of her beauty, but she was modest about it, or seemed to be; which amounts to the same thing.

They sat down at a remote table and Harleston ordered two cold drinks—an apollinaris with a dash of lemon for her, a Jerry Hill for himself. He noticed that the men were looking and wavering, and he deliberately turned his chair around and gave them his back. He had no objection

to presenting the Lady of Peacock Alley to his men friends, but just at this time it was not convenient. The adventure was rather unusual, and the lady altogether attractive and somewhat fascinating; he chose, for the present at least, to go it alone. Moreover, they were to meet on a matter of her business and by her appointment.

He had suggested the *dansant* that he might study her. And the more he saw of her, the more he was struck by her unaffected naturalness and apparent sincerity. Not a word, not even a suggestion, while they were dancing, of the matter of the cab; it was as though she were just an old friend. And her dancing was a delight—such a delight, indeed, that he was reluctant to have it end. Somehow, one gets to know quickly one's partner in the *dansant*.

"This is perfectly entrancing, Mr. Harleston," she said presently, "but don't you think we would better hunt a retired corner and discuss other matters?"

"If you will dine with me when we've discussed them," he replied.

"It's only six o'clock," she smiled; "will the discussion take so long?"

"It depends somewhat on when you wish to dine, and somewhat on the character of the discussion."

Her smile grew into a quiet, rippling laugh.

"Come along," she answered. "I've found a secluded nook in the big red-room downstairs. It's cozy and nice, and I've had the maid reserve it for me. Afterwards," with a sharp stab of her brown eyes, "I'll decide whether I'll dine with you."

The place was as she had said, cozy and nice and secluded; and he put her into it—where the subdued light would fall on her face.

"Very good, sir," she smiled; "I am not afraid of the light."

"Nor would I be if I were you," he replied.

She shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

"Why fence?" she asked.

"Why, indeed?" he replied.

"And why, may I ask, did you meet me here this afternoon?"

"Curiosity—later, satisfaction and appreciation."

"And why do you think I wanted to meet you?"

"Heaven knows!" he replied.

"Suppose, Mr. Harleston, we resume the conversation just where we left off last night. Your last remark then was that I had a chance to get the articles, but no one else had a chance. I'm here now for my chance."

"And that chance depends on a number of contingencies," he replied: "whether I have the desired articles; whether you have the title to them, or the right of possession to them; whether they concern private matters or public matters; if the latter, whether the United States is concerned."

"We can assume the first," said she. "I know for a fact that you took the articles in question from the cab, which you found deserted before a vacant lot."

"How do you know it?" Harleston asked.

"Because, as I told you over the telephone, you were seen—in fact, I saw you. I saw you light a match inside the cab, come out with the envelope, look it over quickly, and put it in your pocket. You'll admit these facts?"

"I am advised by my counsel that I'm not obliged to answer!" he laughed.

"On the ground that it will incriminate you?"

she asked quickly. "Isn't that tantamount to admitting the fact?"

"That is a matter of argument, it seems to me."

She smiled good naturedly and went on:

"As to your second contingency, Mr. Harleston; the envelope and its contents were left with me for delivery to another party—which I believe gives me the right of possession, as you term it. At any rate, it gives me a better title than yours."

"If the party who left them with you had a good title," he amended. "If, however, he obtained them from—a deserted cab, say—then his title would be no better than you've put in me; not so good, in fact, for according to your tale I have the envelope."

She shrugged again.

"Now as to your third contingency," she went on, "I am not able to say what is the nature of the document, nor whom nor what nation it concerns."

"You mean that you're ignorant of its contents and its nature?" he asked.

She met his glance frankly. "I mean that I haven't any idea of its contents or its purpose."

He slowly tapped his cigarette against the swinging brass ash-receiver.

"Wouldn't it be well, my dear Madame X, to lay your cards on the table—all your cards?"

"I'm perfectly willing, if you'll do likewise," she replied instantly.

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"Very well," he returned. "Let me see your hand and you shall see mine."

"This one?" she smiled, holding it up.

He leaned over and took the long, slim fingers in the tips of his own—and she let him.

"'It's mighty pretty," he said, with assumed gravity. "Am I to have it in place of the facts—or along with them?"

"Neither at present," withdrawing her hand. "Business first, Mr. Harleston—and cards on the table."

"You're to play," he smiled, "and whenever you will."

Ordinarily he made up his mind very quickly as to another's sincerity, but she puzzled him. What was the game? And if there were no game so far as she was concerned, how did she happen to be in the very midst of it, and trying to recover

—or to obtain—the cipher letter and the photograph? It was a queer situation; the reasonable inferences were against her. Yet——

"I hardly know where to begin," she was saying.

"Begin at the beginning," he advised.

He must appear to credit her story that she was concerned only as an innocent associate. And it was not difficult to do, sitting there beside her in the subdued light, under the witching tones of her voice, and the alluring fascination of her face. The face was not perfect; far from it, if by perfect is meant features accordant with one another and true to type. Her hair was flaming red; her eyes were brown, dark brown, a certain pensiveness in them most inaccordant with the hair; her nose was slender, with sensitive nostrils; her mouth was generous with lips a trifle full; her teeth were exquisitely white and symmetrical—and she showed them with due modesty, yet with proper appreciation of their beauty.

Altogether she was a very charming picture; and throwing away his cigarette, he lighted a cigar and settled back to watch the play of her features and hear the melody of her voice. He was a trifle impressed with the lady—and he was willing that

the tale require time and attention. Furthermore, it was his business to observe her critically, so that he might decide as to the matter in hand. In the present instance his business was very much to his liking, but that did not make it any the less business.

Something of which the lady may have suspected, and was prepared to humour. A man must be humoured at times—particularly when the woman is trying for something that can only be come at through his favour or acquiescence.

"To begin at the beginning will make it a long story," she warned.

"Then by all means begin it there," he answered.

"You can endure it?"

"I'm very comfortable; we are alone; and the *light* is admirable."

"Same here!" she smiled, with a tantalizing glance from the brown eyes. "Can you start me?"

"I might, but I won't. The glory shall all be yours."

"I'm glad there is to be some glory in this affair; there's been little enough so far. However, to begin."

"No hurry, my dear Madame X."

"Don't you want my decision as to dinner?" she asked.

"You can continue the narrative while we dine. Now to begin."

"Then vanish Madame X, and enter Mistress Clephane."

At that moment a woman and a man entered the room from the corridor by the middle door, and crossed to a divan in the corner farthest from Mrs. Clephane and Harleston. The former had her back to them; Harleston was facing their way and saw them.

The man was middle-aged, bald, and somewhat stout—and Harleston recognized one of his visitors of the early morning. The woman was sinuous, with raven hair, dead white complexion, a perfectly lovely face, and a superb figure. Harleston would have known that walk and that figure anywhere and at any time even if he had not seen her face.

It was Madeline Spencer.

VIII

THE STORY

HARLESTON quickly swung his chair around so that the broad back hid Mrs. Clephane and himself. He was quite sure that she had noticed the pair; though when he glanced at her she was looking thoughtfully at him, as if considering where to begin her story.

"Do you know the two who just came in and are sitting in the far corner," he asked; "the slender woman and the bald-headed man?"

"No," she answered; "except that she is an exceedingly fine-looking woman—as you doubtless have noted."

"I've noted other things!" he smiled.

"About her?"

"No, not about her."

She laughed, deliciously he thought.

"I best get on with my tale," she said. "So, once upon a time, which means, to be accurate,

about ten days ago, I took a steamer at Cherbourg for New York. On the boat was a Madame Durrand, whom I had known on the Continent and in London for a number of years. Neither was aware of the other's sailing until we met aboard. I think that it was on the fourth day out she asked me to come to her state-room; there she told me that she was a secret agent of the French Government and the bearer of a most important letter from a high official, written however in his private capacity to their Ambassador in Washington; that she had a presentiment ill fortune would befall her on the way; that there was no one else on the ship in whom she trusted; and that she wanted me to accompany her to Washington, and, if she were to meet with an accident, to deliver the letter to the Ambassador. I consented, wishing to oblige her, and being bound for Washington. She showed me where she carried the letter, and gave me the verbal message that went with it, which was the name of the Minister and that he sent it in his private capacity and not officially.

"I'm not in the secret service of a government, as you doubtless can infer from my knowledge of matters and use of technical language!" she

smiled. "And the affair rather fascinated me, I admit, by its unusualness. Moreover, I knew Madame Durrand intimately—how intimately may be inferred from the circumstances.

"Well, we landed, had our baggage chalked, and went to the Plaza for the night. In the morning, we took a taxi to the Pennsylvania Station, were held up by traffic, and were hurrying down the marble steps to catch our train, when a man, hurrying also, jostled Madame Durrand. Her heel caught and she plunged head first down to the landing. Of course men sprang forward to her assistance and picked her up—with her wrist and ankle broken. She was plucky, however, wonderfully plucky. She did not faint, as I'm sure I should have done; she just turned ghastly pale—and said to me, with a bit of smile, motioning for me to bend over her so that none could hear:

"'I told you so, Edith. Here is where you come in.' She slid her hand under her skirt, drew out the envelope, and slipped it to me. 'Hurry!' she said. 'You can yet make the train.'

"But I was obdurate; I wouldn't leave her until she was in a hospital and comfortable. And when she saw I meant it, she smiled—and fainted.

Well, instead of the ten o'clock train, I caught the twelve, which should have landed me here at five, but a series of delays, due to accidents ahead; put us at seven. It was, I thought, too late to deliver my letter that evening, so I took a taxi here and had dinner. Then I paid a short visit to some friends at the Shoreham and returned shortly before midnight. I found two notices that I had been called on the telephone at 10:15 and 11:00, by parties who declined to give their names or leave a call. This struck me as queer since no one knew of my being in town except my friends at the Shoreham. A moment after I entered my room, the telephone rang. I answered. A man's voice came back.

"'Who is that?' said he.

"'Whom do you want?' said I.

"'I wish to speak to Mrs. Clephane.'

"'Very well,' said I; 'I'm Mrs. Clephane.'

"'Oh, Mrs. Clephane, we have been trying for you since ten o'clock!' said he. 'The Ambassador wishes to see you at once. Can you be ready to come in fifteen minutes—we'll send a carriage for you?'

"'How did you know'—I began, then stopped.

'Yes, I'll be ready,' said I; 'but let one of the staff come with the carriage.'

"'Oh, of course!' he replied. 'In fifteen minutes, madame?'

"I didn't fancy going out at midnight, yet I had undertaken the matter and I would see it through. I had not changed from my travelling suit and it hadn't a pocket in it; nor had I one such as Madame Durrand employed, so I was carrying the letter pinned inside my waist. Now I took it out and put it in my hand-bag, all the while thinking over the affair and liking it less the more I thought. It was pretty late at night, and there was something suspicious about the affair. I went to the desk and hurriedly wrote a note to the friends that I had just left; then I called a page, and ordered him to take it at once to the Shoreham. On the envelope I had written the instruction that it was not to be delivered until morning.

"As I finished, the telephone rang and Mr. and Mrs. Buissard, I think that was the name, were announced as coming by appointment. I went down at once. Mrs. Buissard was in evening dress, a pretty, vivacious woman, Mr. Buissard was a man of thirty, slender, with a little black

moustache and black hair. Somehow I didn't like him; and I was glad he had brought his wife—she was charming.

"They had a cab instead of a car or taxi. We got in and drove up Fourteenth to H, and out H to Sixteenth. As we swung in Sixteenth, the man leaned forward to the window on my side.

"'Look at that!' he exclaimed excitedly.

"As I turned to look, the woman flung her silk wrap over my head and twisted it tightly about my neck.

"I tried to cry out, but a hand closed over my mouth and only a weak gurgle responded.

"'Listen, Mrs. Clephane!' said the man, 'We mean you no harm. Give us the package you have for the French Ambassador, and we will at once return you to your hotel.'

"I'm pretty much a coward, yet I managed to hold myself together and not faint, and to say nothing. I didn't care a straw for the letter, but I didn't fancy being defeated at that stage of the game. I tried to think—but thinking is a bit difficult under such circumstances. Just as the wrap went over my head, my hand happened to be on my hand-bag. I quietly opened it, dropped

the letter close along the seat, and closed the bag. Here was a slight chance to balk them—at all events, it was the only course occurring to me at the moment.

"'Has she fainted?' asked the man.

"'I think so,' said the woman, 'or she is scared to death.'

"Here was a suggestion—and I took it. I remained perfectly quiet.

"'Well,' was his answer, 'we're almost there, and it's a lucky chance. No trouble at all, Seraphina.'

"I had felt the cab round several corners; almost immediately after the last it stopped. I'm a trifle hazy as to what they did; but finally I was passed out of the cab like a corpse and carried into a house. There the wrap was removed from my head; I blinked uncertainly, and looked around in a bewildered fashion.

"'Where am I?' I gasped.

"The woman replied, 'You're in absolutely no danger, Mrs. Clephane. We want the package you have for the French Ambassador; when we have it, we will send you back to your hotel.'

"'What is to be done with the cab?' someone asked.

"'Nothing,' another replied. 'The horse will find his way to his stand; he's almost there.'

"'But I haven't any package!' I protested.

"'Come, come!' the woman answered briskly. 'You have it about you somewhere; that was what you were going to the Embassy to deliver?'

"'Who are you?' I demanded.

"'It matters not who we are—we want the package.'

"'The package is not with me,' I remarked. "It's locked in the hotel safe.'

"'Will you permit yourself to be searched?' she asked, with an amused smile. I knew it was a threat.

"'I'm perfectly willing to submit to a search by *you*,' I said. 'The quicker you set about it, the quicker I'll be released. I don't care for these diplomatic affairs; they may be regular but they seem unnecessarily dangerous. I was simply a substitute anyway, and I won't substitute again; though how you people discovered it I don't see.'

"'Because you're new at the game,' she replied, as we passed into the drawing-room.

"She closed the door—and I soon satisfied her that the package was not concealed about me.

"'I may go now?' I inquired.

"'I think so, but I must consult the Chief,' she replied. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

"They seemed high-class knaves at least; but it was quite evident that the diplomatic game and its secret service were distinctly not in my line. I want no more of them even to oblige a friend in distress. I hate a mess!"

"I'm very glad for this mess," Harleston interjected. "Otherwise I should not have—met you."

"And you are the only compensation for the mess, Mr. Harleston!" she smiled.

She said it so earnestly Harleston was almost persuaded that she meant it—though he replied with a shrug and a sceptical laugh.

"But the woman was long in returning," Mrs. Clephane resumed; "and after a while I put out the light, and going to the window raised the shade. The cab was no longer before the house; it had moved a little distance to the left, and the horse was lying down in the shafts. As I was debating whether to risk the jump from the window, a man came down the street and halted at the cab.—That man was you, Mr. Harleston. The rest of the tale

you know much better than I—and the material portion you are to tell me, or rather to give me."

"How did you know the man at the cab was I? You didn't recognize me in the corridor, this afternoon."

"Oh, yes I did—but I waited to see if you would follow me, or would go up to the other woman in black and roses."

"I never was in doubt!" Harleston laughed. "I told you, on the telephone, that I could pick you out in a crowd; after a glimpse of you, I could—" he ended with a gesture.

"Still pick me out," she supplied. "Well, the important thing is that you *did* pick me out—and that you're a gentleman. Also you forget that your picture has been pretty prominent lately, on account of the Du Portal affair; and besides you've been pointed out to me a number of times during the last few years as something of a celebrity. So, you see, it was not a great trick to recognize you under the electric lights, even at one o'clock in the morning."

Harleston nodded. It was plausible surely. Moreover, he was prepared to accept her story;

thus far it seemed straightforward and extremely credible.

"It was about three when you telephoned to me —where were you then?" he asked.

"At the Chateau. They were kind enough to release me about three o'clock, and to send me back in a private car—at least, it wasn't a taxi. Now, have you any other questions?"

"I think not, for the present."

"Have I satisfied you that my tale is true?"

"I am satisfied," he replied.

"Then you will give me the letter?" she said joyfully.

"And what of the roses?"

"I presented them to you last night."

"And of this handkerchief?" drawing it from his pocket.

She took the bit of lace, glanced at it, and handed it back.

"It is not mine," she replied. "Probably it's the other woman's." She held out her hand, the most symmetrical hand Harleston had ever seen. "My letter, please, Mr. Harleston."

"I no longer have the letter," said Harleston.

"Then why did you—" she exclaimed; "but you can lay your hand on it?"

"I can lay my hand on it," he smiled—"whenever you convince me, or I ascertain, that the letter does not concern directly or indirectly the diplomatic affairs of the United States. You forget that was the concluding stipulation, Mrs. Clephane. Meanwile the letter will not, you may feel assured, fall into the possession of the party who attempted to steal it from you."

"What does it all mean?" she asked, leaning forward. "Who beside France are the parties concerned?"

"It means that some nation is ready to take desperate chances to prevent your letter from reaching the French Ambassador. What actuates it, whether to learn its contents or to prevent its present delivery, I naturally do not know." Then he laughed. "Would it interest you very much to learn, Mrs. Clephane, that I was visited last night by three men, who tried, at the point of the revolver, to force the letter from me?"

"You surely don't mean it!" she exclaimed.

And with this exclamation the last doubt in Harleston's mind of Mrs. Clephane's having aught

to do with the night attack vanished—and having acquitted her in that respect, there was scarcely any question as to the sincerity and truth of her tale.

As it has been remarked previously, Mrs. Clephane was very good to look at—and what is more to the point with Harleston, she looked back.

"I had all sorts of adventures, beginning with the cab of the sleeping horse, three crushed roses, a bit of lace, and a letter," he laughed; "and the adventures haven't yet ended, and they grow more interesting as they progress."

"They didn't get the letter?" she asked quickly.

"They got nothing but the trouble of getting nothing," he replied.

"Where is the letter now, Mr. Harleston—is it safe from them?"

There was a note of concern in her voice, and it puzzled him. What else did she know—or didn't she know anything? Was it only his habit in diplomatic affairs to doubt everything that was not undoubtable.

"The letter," he replied, "is with the expert of the State Department for translation."

"What language is it in?" she demanded.

"Cipher language—and a particularly difficult cipher it is. Can you help us out, Mrs. Clephane?"

"I can't, Mr. Harleston; I don't know anything about ciphers. And I told you the whole truth when I said that I neither knew what the envelope contained nor its purpose. What disturbs me is how to explain to the French Ambassador the loss of the letter."

"Tell him the exact truth," said Harleston. "It would have been better possibly had you told him this morning."

"I thought you would return the letter to me," she replied.

"I likely should, had I seen you before I turned it over to the State Department. Now that it has passed out of my hands, it is a matter for the Secretary to decide."

"But he will be advised by you!" she exclaimed.

"Advised, yes,—dominated, no. The only chance of the letter being returned to you, is that it does not affect this government."

"Diplomacy then is willing to stoop to any crime or to profit by any wrong?" she mocked.

"I am afraid I must admit the accusation. Everything is fair in love and war, you know—and diplomacy is only a species of war."

"Have I no redress for the outrage upon me, nor for the loss of the letter by reason of that outrage?"

"I'm afraid you'll find the wheels of justice very slow-moving—when they have to do with affairs diplomatic."

"But the letter, sir?"

"You must remember, Mrs. Clephane, that I found the letter in an abandoned cab."

"And now that you know to whom it belongs," she flashed, "you will not return it?"

"Because I can't! Which brings us back to where we started—and to dinner."

"I will not dine with you!"

"Then let me dine with you!"

"No!"

"Fix it any way you wish, only so that we dine together," he persisted. "I've the cosiest little table reserved for us, and——"

"Mr. Harleston," the page was calling. "Mr. Harles——"

Harleston turned, and the boy saw him.

"Telephone, sir," said he, giving Harleston the call slip.

"Will you excuse me a moment, Mrs. Clephane?" Harleston asked, and hurried out—conscious all the while that Madeline Spencer and her companion were watching him.

"This is Police Headquarters, Mr. Harleston," came the voice over the wire. "Major Ranleigh wants to know if you will meet him at his office at ten o'clock tonight. The Major was called out suddenly or he would have telephoned you, himself!"

"I'll be on hand," Harleston replied, hung up the receiver, and hurried back.

As he entered the red-room, he shot a covert glance toward the place where Mrs. Spencer and her companion had been sitting.

They were gone!

"Yes! Yes!" said he under his breath, and turned toward the corner where he had left Mrs. Clephane.

Mrs. Clephane was gone.

IX

DECOYED

HARLESTON faced about and surveyed the entire room. Then not content with surveying, he deliberately walked through it, and satisfied himself that Mrs. Clephane was not there—nor Madeline Spencer, nor her bald-headed companion.

He took a turn up and down the corridor, and up and down again. They were not there.

He even walked through the dining-rooms.

Nothing!

"Hum!" said he, at length—and returned to the red-room, and to his chair. It was quite possible that Mrs. Clephane would be back in a moment—yet somehow he doubted.

He waited for a quarter of an hour, and she did not come. He made another tour of Peacock Alley, the lobby, the dining-rooms, and back to the red-room.

Nothing!

He looked at his watch—it was half-after-seven o'clock. He would wait fifteen minutes longer. Then, if she had not come, he would go about his business—which, at present, was to dine.

He sat with his watch in his hand, looking down the room and at those who entered.

The fifteen minutes passed. He put up his watch and arose; the wait was ended.

He crossed the corridor to the dining-room.

"The table in yonder corner, Philippe," he said, to the bowing head-waiter.

"One, Monsieur Harleston?" the man replied; and himself escorted him over and placed him, and took his order for dinner. From which facts it can be inferred that Harleston was something of a personage at the big caravansary.

The clams had just been placed before him, and he was dipping the first one in the cocktail, when Madeline Spencer and the bald-headed man entered and passed to a table—reserved for them—at the far side of the room. Harleston knew that she saw him, though apparently she had not glanced his way. Here was another move in the game; but what the game, and what the immediate object?

His waiter whisked away the clam cocktail and put down the clear turtle.

As Harleston took up his spoon, a page spoke a word to Philippe, who motioned him to Harleston's corner. The next instant the boy was there, a letter on the extended salver—then he faded away.

Harleston put aside the letter until he had finished his soup; then he picked it up and turned it over. It was a hotel envelope, and addressed simply: "Mr. Harleston," in a woman's handwriting—full and free, and, unusual to relate, quite legible. He ran his knife under the flap and drew out the letter. It was in the same hand that wrote the address.

"DEAR MR. HARLESTON:

"I've just seen someone whom I wish to avoid, so won't you be good enough to dine with me in my apartment. It's No. 972, and cosy and quiet—and please come at once. I'm waiting for you—with an explanation for my disappearance.

"EDITH CLEPHANE."

"Hum!" said Harleston, and drummed thoughtfully on the table. Then he arose, said a word to

Philippe as he passed, and went out to the elevator.

He got off at the ninth floor and walked down the corridor to No. 972. It was a corner and overlooked Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourteenth Street. He tapped lightly on the door; almost immediately it was opened by a maid—a very pretty maid, he noticed—who, without waiting for him to speak, addressed him as Monsieur Harleston, and told him that Madame was expecting him.

Harleston handed the maid his hat, stick, and gloves, and crossed the private hall into the drawing-room.

As he passed the doorway, a heavy silk handkerchief was flung around his neck from behind, and instantly tightened over his larynx; at the same time his arms were pinioned to his side. He could neither make a sound nor raise a hand. He was being garroted. At his first struggle the garrote was twisted; it was be quiet or be strangled. And, queer as it may seem, his first thought was of the garroters of India and the instant helplessness of their victims. In fact, so immediate was his helplessness, that it sapped all will to be otherwise than quiescent.

"Two can play at this game, Mr. Harleston," said a familiar voice, and Crenshaw stepped out in front. "I'm in a better humour now, and more my natural self; I was somewhat peeved in the Collingwood—due to late hours, I think. By the way, it isn't an especially pleasant game for the fellow who is it, Mr. Harleston? I'll take your answer for granted—or we'll let my distinguished colleague answer for you—you know Mr. Sparrow, sir?" as the man with the garrote put his head over Harleston's shoulder. "Answer for Mr. Harleston, will you, Sparrow?"

"No, it is not, Mr. Crenshaw," said Sparrow.

"I neglected to ask if you're not surprised to see me, Mr. Harleston?"

"I am indeed," said Sparrow.

"I regret that it was inconvenient for me to remain longer in your apartment, Mr. Harleston—and so I exchanged places with your detective," Crenshaw explained.

"I'm quite content, Mr. Crenshaw," Sparrow replied.

"Yes, certainly, and thank you, Mr. Harleston," Crenshaw smiled. "And now, with your permission, sir, we shall inspect the contents

of your pockets, to the end that we may find a certain letter that you wot of—also ourselves."

After the first warning twist, the garrote had been relaxed just enough to permit Harleston breath sufficient for life, yet not sufficient for an outcry; moreover, he knew that at the first murmur of a yell the wrist behind him would turn and he would be throttled into unconsciousness.

There was nothing to do but be quiet and as complaisant as his captors wished, and await developments. And the irony of such a situation—happening in the most crowded and most popular hotel in the Capital, with hundreds of guests at hand, and scores of servants poised to obey one's slightest nod—struck him with all the force of its supreme absurdity. It was but another proof of the proposition that one is never so alone as in the midst of a throng.

He smiled—somewhat chillily, it must be admitted—and whispered, his speaking voice being shut off by the garrote.

"The quicker you look, the sooner I shall, I hope, be released from this rather uncomfortable position."

"Good eye!" said Crenshaw. "You're a

reasonable man, Mr. Harleston, it's a pleasure to do business with you."

"Proceed!" Harleston whispered. "I haven't the letter with me, as you should know. Do I look so much like a novice? Furthermore, if I am not mistaken, I told you that I was going direct to the State Department to deliver the letter for translation, so how could I have it now?"

"We're not debating, we're searching," Crenshaw sneered; "though it may occur to you that a copy is as easy of translation as the original. However, we will proceed with the inspection—the proof of the caviare is in the roe of the sturgeon."

"Then I pray you open the fish at once," said Harleston. "I can't assist you in my present attitude, so get along, Mr. Crenshaw, if you please. You interrupted my dinner—I was just at the soup; and you may believe me when I say that I'm a bit hungry."

"With your permission," Crenshaw replied, proceeding to go through Harleston's pockets, and finding nothing but the usual—which he replaced.

He came last to the breast-pocket of the coat; in it were the wallet and one letter—the letter that had brought Harleston here.

"It caught you!" Crenshaw smiled. "There's no bait like a pretty woman!"

Harleston raised his eyebrows and shrugged his answer.

"And a rather neat trap, wasn't it—we're very much pleased with it."

"You'll not be pleased with what it produces," Harleston smiled.

"It has produced you," the other mocked; "that's quite some production, don't you think? And now, as this letter has served its purpose, I'll take the liberty of destroying it," tearing it into bits and putting the bits in his pockets, "lest one of us be liable for forgery. Now for the pocket-book; you found something in mine, you may remember, Mr. Harleston."

Harleston gave a faint chuckle. They would find nothing in his pocket-book but some visiting and membership cards, a couple of addresses and a few yellow-backs and silver certificates.

"The letter doesn't seem to be there—which I much regret, but these visiting cards may be useful in our business; with your permission I'll take them. Thank you, Mr. Harleston."

He folded the book and returned it to Harleston's pocket.

"I might have looked in your shoes, or done something disagreeable—I believe I even promised to smash your face when I got the opportunity—but I'm better disposed now. I shall return good for evil; instead of tying you up as you did me, I'll release you from your bonds if you give me your word to remain quiet in this room until tomorrow morning at eight, and not to disclose to anyone, before that hour, what has occurred here."

"After that?" said Harleston.

"You shall be at liberty to depart and to tell."

"And if I do not give my word?"

"Then," said Crenshaw pleasantly, "we shall be obliged to bind you and gag you and leave you to be discovered by the maid—which, we shall carefully provide, will not be before eight tomorrow morning."

"You leave small choice," Harleston observed.

"Just the choice between comfort and discomfort!" Crenshaw laughed. "Which shall it be, sir?"

Harleston had been shifting slowly from one foot to the other, feeling behind him for the man with

the garrote. He had him located now and the precise position where he was standing—one of his own legs was touching Sparrow's.

At the instant Crenshaw had finished his question, Harleston suddenly kicked backwards, landing with all the force of his sharp heel full on Sparrow's shin.

Instantly the garrote loosened; and Harleston, with a wild yell, sprang forward and swung straight at the point of Crenshaw's jaw.

Crenshaw dodged it—and the two men grappled and went down, fighting furiously; Harleston letting out shouts all the while, and even managing to overturn a table, which fell with a terrific smash of broken glass and bric-à-brac, to attract attention and lead to an investigation.

He had not much trouble in mastering Crenshaw; but Sparrow, when he was done spinning around on one foot from the agonizing pain of the kick on the shin, would be another matter; the two men and the woman could overpower him, unless assistance came quickly. And to that end he raised all the uproar possible for the few seconds that Sparrow spun and the woman stared.

Just as Sparrow hobbled to Crenshaw's aid,

Harleston landed a short arm blow on the latter's ear and sprang up, avoided the former's rush and made for the hall-way.

At the same moment came a loud pounding on the corridor door. The noise had been effective.

In a bound, Harleston reached the door; it should, as he knew, open from within by a turn of the knob. But it was double-locked on the inside and the key was missing.

He whirled—just in time to see the last of the mixed trio disappear into the drawing-room, and the door snap shut behind them.

He sped across and flung himself against it—it was locked.

Meanwhile the pounding on the corridor door went on.

"Try another door!" Harleston shouted.

But by reason of the heavy door and the din, some time elapsed before he could attract the attention of those in the corridor and make himself understood. Then more time was consumed in getting the floor-maid with the pass-key to the room adjoining the drawing-room of the suite.

By that time, the manager of the hotel had come up and put himself at the head of the relief; and he

was not in the best of temper when he entered and saw the debris of the bric-à-brac and the table.

"What is the meaning of—" he demanded—then he recognized Harleston and stopped—"I beg your pardon, Mr. Harleston! I didn't know that you were here, sir; this apartment was occupied by——"

"Two men and a woman," Harleston supplied. "Well, it's been vacated by them in deference to me."

"I don't understand!" said the manager.

"If you will have the baggage, which, I imagine, is in the bedrooms, examined, and give me your private ear for a moment, I'll endeavour to explain as much as I know."

"Certainly, Mr. Harleston," the man replied; and, directing the others to examine the baggage, he closed the door of the drawing-room.

"First tell me who occupied this suite, when it was taken, and when they came," said Harleston.

"One moment," said the manager, and picking up the telephone he called the office. "It was, the office says, occupied by a Mr. and Mrs.

Davidson of New York City, who took it this afternoon about five o'clock. They had made no reservation for it."

"Now as to their baggage."

The manager bowed and went out—to return almost instantly, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Two new and cheap suit cases, each containing a couple of bricks and some waste paper," he reported.

"Yes," nodded Harleston, "I thought as much. Mr. Banks, you will confer a favour on me, and possibly on the government, if you will be good enough to let this affair pass unnoticed, at least for the time. I'll pay for the broken table and its contents, and a proper charge for the rooms for the few hours they've been occupied. I overturned the table. As for the rest—how I came to be here, and what became of the occupants, and why the furniture was smashed, and why I have a slight contusion in my cheek, and anything else occurring to the management as requiring explanation, just forget it, please."

"Certainly, sir."

"Very good!" said Harleston. "Now wait one moment."

He went to the telephone and asked for Mrs. Clephane's apartment.

Her maid answered—with the information that Mrs. Clephane had been out since five o'clock and had not yet returned.

Harleston thanked her, hung up the receiver, and turned to Banks.

"I have reason to believe that Mrs. Clephane, who is a guest of the hotel, has disappeared. I was talking to her in the red-room at about 6:30, when I was called to the telephone. On my return, after a brief absence, she was gone, and a frequent and thorough search on the first floor did not disclose her. She was to have dined with me at seven-thirty. She did not keep the engagement. I dined alone, and had just begun the meal when a letter was handed to me asking that I dine with her in her apartment, No. 972. I came here at once—and was held up by two men and a woman, who sought to obtain something that they imagined was in my possession. It wasn't, however, and we fought; and I raised sufficient disturbance to bring you. You see, I have told you something of the affair. The note was a forgery. This isn't Mrs. Clephane's apartment, and her maid has just told me

that her mistress has not been in her apartment since five o'clock—which was the time she met me. I am persuaded that she is a prisoner, and likely in this hotel—held so to prevent her disclosing a certain matter to a certain high official. What I want is for you to make every effort to determine whether she is in this house."

"We'll do it, Mr. Harleston," the manager acquiesced instantly. "Come down to the office and we'll go over the guest diagram, while I have every unoccupied room looked into. In fact, sir, we'll do anything short of burglaring our guests."

"I'll be right down," Harleston said; "after I've bathed my face and straightened up a bit."

The contusion on his cheek was not particularly noticeable; it might be worse in the morning; his collar was a trifle crushed and his hair was awry; on the whole, he had come out of the fight very well.

He took up his stick and gloves, put on his hat so as to shade, as far as possible, the cheek-bone, and went down to the private office.

There was, of course, the chance that Mrs. Clephane had lured him into the trap, and had herself written the decoy note; but he did not

believe her guilty. Even though Crenshaw had adroitly implicated her, he was not influenced. Indeed, he was convinced of just the reverse:—that she was honest and sincere and inexperienced, and that she had told him the true story of the letter and its loss. At least he was acting on that theory, and was prepared to see it through. Maybe he was a fool to believe those brown eyes and that soft voice and those charming ways; if so, he preferred to be a fool for a little while, to, if not, being a fool to her forever. He had, in his time, encountered many women with beautiful faces and compelling eyes and alluring voices and charming ways, but with none had they been so blended as in Mrs. Clephane.

He did not know a thing as to her history—he did not even know whether she was married, a widow, or a divorcée. Whatever she was, he was willing to accept her as genuine—until she was proven otherwise.

All of which would indicate that she had made something of an impression on Harleston—who was neither by nature nor by experience impressible, and, in the diplomatic game, had about as much sentiment as a granite crag. In fact, with

Harleston every woman who appeared in the diplomatic game lay under instant and heavy suspicion.

Mrs. Clephane was the first exception.

X

SKIRMISHING

On the slender chance of finding Mrs. Clephane, Harleston made another tour of the rooms and corridor on the first floor.

It was without avail—save that he noticed Madeline Spencer and her escort were still at dinner. They did not see him—and he was very well content. Later he would want a word with them—particularly with her; and he preferred to meet her alone. She was a very beautiful woman, and very alluring, and the time was, and not so long ago, when he would have gone far out of his way to meet her; but another face—and business—occupied him at present. Moreover, the business had to do with Mrs. Spencer, and that shortly. Therefore he was content to be patient. Mrs. Clephane first.

So he went on to the private office and the manager.

"I've just taken another look over this floor," he said; "Mrs. Clephane is not to be seen."

"We paged her, also," returned Banks; "and we've had every vacant room in the house examined without result. Here's the diagram; let us go over it, perhaps we can get a lead from it. About half of the guests are personally known to the hotel; they are either permanent guests or have been coming here for a long time. However, pick out any that you suspect and we'll try to find a way to get into their rooms. We are always at the service of the government, particularly the State Department."

Harleston ran his eyes over the diagram, searching for Madeline Spencer. It was barely possible that she was registered under one of her own names. He found it at last—or thought he had: No. 717:—Madame Cuthbert and maid.

"What do you know of her?" he asked, indicating No. 717.

"Nothing whatever, except that she seems to have plenty of money, and looks the lady."

"When did she come?"

"Three days ago."

"What is No. 717?"

"Two bedrooms, a parlour, and a bath."

"I should like to know if she has had callers, and who they are; also, if the house detective knows anything of her movements?"

"One moment, sir," said Banks——

"And you might inquire also," Harleston added, "as to the bald-headed man who is her companion this evening?"

"Very good, sir," said Banks, and went out.

"I tell you there are quite too many women in this affair," Harleston muttered—and went back to inspecting the chart.

And the more he inspected, the more hopeless grew his task. If Mrs. Clephane had been lured to one of the rooms, it would be next to impossible to find her. There were a hundred well-dressed and quiet-mannered guests who seemed beyond suspicion; and yet it was in the room of one of these unobtrusive guests, who had never so much as looked at Mrs. Spencer, that Mrs. Clephane was held prisoner. There was small hope—none, indeed—that a search of Madeline Spencer's apartment would yield even a clue. She was not such a bungler; though that she was the directing spirit in the entire affair he had not the least

doubt. Her photograph fixed the matter on her; and while he was quite sure she was not aware of the photograph, yet she was aware of the letter, had made a desperate effort to prevent its delivery, and now was making a final effort to prevent Mrs. Clephane from advising the French Ambassador of its loss.

As to him, Mrs. Spencer was not concerned. His possession of the letter, under such circumstances, effectually closed his mouth; if he happened to know for whom the letter was intended, his mouth was closed all the tighter. It was a rule of the diplomatic game never to reveal, even to an ally, what you know; tomorrow the ally may be the enemy. Harleston might yield the letter to superior force or to trickery, but he would never babble of it.

The door opened to admit Banks.

"The detective has nothing whatever as to Madame Cuthbert," he explained. "He says she is apparently a lady, and nothing has occurred to bring her under his notice. For the same reason, no list of her callers has been made—though the desk thinks that they have been comparatively few. The man with whom she

dined this evening is a Mr. Rufus Martin. He has been with her several times. He is a guest of the hotel—room No. 410."

"Can you have her apartment and Martin's looked over without exciting suspicion?"

"I think we can manage it," Banks responded. "Indeed, I think we can manage to have all the rooms inspected; I have already told the detective what we suspect, and he has put on an employee's uniform and with a basket of electric bulbs is now testing the lights in every occupied room. The moment he finds Mrs. Clephane, or anything that points to her, he will advise us."

"Good!" said Harleston. "Meanwhile, I'll have another look in Peacock Alley."

He was aware that he was acting on a pure hunch. He realized that his theory of Mrs. Clephane's imprisonment in the house was most inconsistent with the facts. Why did they release her last night, if they were fearful of her communicating to the French Ambassador the loss of the letter? And why should they take her again this evening? It was all unreasonable; yet reason does not prevail against a hunch—even to a reasoning man, who is also a diplomat.

He sauntered along the gay corridor bowing to those he knew. As he faced about to return, he saw Madeline Spencer, alone, bearing down upon him.

The moment their eyes met, she signalled a glad smile and advanced with hands extended.

"Why, Guy!" she exclaimed. "What a surprise this is!"

"And what a charming pleasure to me, Madeline," he added, taking both her hands and holding them. "I thought you were in Paris; indeed, I thought you would never leave the City of Boulevards."

"So did I, yet here I am; yet not for long, I trust, Guy, not for long."

"America's misfortune," he whispered.

"Or fortune!" she laughed. "It's merely a matter of viewpoint. To those who have knowledge of the comparatively recent past, Madeline Spencer may be a *persona non*. However—" with a shrug of her shapely shoulders and an indifferent lift of her fine hands. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Harleston; that is, if you're not afraid for your reputation. I assume that here you have a reputation to protect."

"I'm quite sure that my reputation, whatever it be, won't suffer by what you intimate!" he smiled, and handed her into a chair.

"You were much surprised to see me, *n'est-ce pas?*" she asked low, leaning close.

"Much more than much," he replied confidentially.

"Honest?" she asked, still low and close.

"Much more than honest," he answered. "It's been a long time since we met."

"Three months!"

"Three months is much more than long—sometimes."

She gave him an amused smile.

"I was thinking of you only last night," he volunteered.

"What suggested me?" she asked quickly.

"I suppose it must have been your proximity," he replied easily and instantly.

"Wireless," she laughed, "or community of interests?"

"I don't know—the impression was vivid enough, while it lasted, for you to have been in the room."

"Maybe I was—in spirit."

"I'm sure of it," he replied. "How long have you been in Washington, Madeline?"

"You should have felt my proximity as soon as I arrived," she responded.

"I felt it nearing when you left Paris—and growing closer as time went on. You see, I have a remarkable intuition as—to you."

"Charming!" she trilled. "Why not get a *penchant* for me, as well?"

"Maybe I have—and don't venture to declare myself."

"You!" she mocked.

"Meaning that I can't get a *penchant*, or that I am not afraid to declare?"

"Both!" she laughed. "Now quit talking nonsense and tell me about yourself. What have you been doing, and what are you doing?"

"At the very profitable and busy occupation of killing time," he replied.

"Of course, but what else?"

"Nothing!"

"What, for instance, were you doing last night?"

"Last night? I dined at the Club, played auction, and went home at a seemly hour."

"Home? Where is that?"

"The Collingwood."

"And what adventure befell you on the way—if any?"

"Adventure? I haven't had an adventure since I left the Continent."

"Sure?"

"Perfectly. I wish I had—to vary the monotony."

She traced a diagram on the rug with the tip of her slipper.

"It depends on what you regard as an adventure," she smiled. "I should think the episode of the cab, with what followed at your apartment, was very much in that line?"

"Oh, to be sure!" exclaimed Harleston, with an air of complete surprise. "However did—Great Heavens, Madeline, were *you* the woman of the roses and the cab?"

"You know that I wasn't!" she replied.

"Then how do you know of the cab of the sleeping horse, and what followed?" he inquired blandly.

"I dreamed it."

"Wonderful! Simply wonderful!"

She nodded tolerantly. "Why keep up the

fiction?" she asked. "You know that I am concerned in your adventure—just as I know of your adventure. I was on the street, or in the house, or was told of it, whichever you please; it's all one, since you know. Moreover you have seen me with one of your early morning callers, as I meant you to do." She leaned forward and looked at him with half-closed eyes. "Will you believe me, Guy, when I say that the United States is not concerned in the matter—and that it should keep its hands off. You stumbled by accident on the deserted cab. A subordinate blundered, or you would not have found it ready for your investigation—and you've been unduly and unnecessarily inquisitive. We have tried to be forbearing and considerate in our efforts to regain it, but——"

"Regain, my dear Madeline, implies, or at least it conveys an idea of, previous possession. Did Germany—I beg your pardon; did your client in this matter have such——"

"I used regain advisedly," she broke in.

"Because of your possession of the lady, or because of your independent possession of the letter?"

"You're pleased to be technical," she shrugged.

"Not at all!" he replied. "I'm simply after the facts: whether the letter belongs to you, or to the mysterious lady of the cab?"

"Who isn't in the least mysterious to you."

"No!"

"Really, you're delicious, Mr. Harleston; though I confess that *you* have *me* mystified as to your game in pretending what you and I know is pretence."

"You're pleased to be enigmatic!" Harleston laughed.

"Oh, no I'm not," she smiled, flashing her rings and watching the flashes—and him. "You saw me, and you know that I saw you; and I saw you and know that you saw me. Now, as I've said it in words of one syllable, I trust you will understand."

"I understand," said he; "but you have side-stepped the point:—To whom does this lost letter belong: to you or to——"

"Mrs. Clephane?" she adjected.

"Exactly: to you, or to Mrs. Clephane?"

"What does that matter to you—since it does not belong to *you?*"

"I may be a friend of Mrs. Clephane? Or I

may regard myself as a trustee for the safe delivery of the letter."

"A volunteer?"

"If you so have it!" he smiled.

She beat a tattoo with her slender, nervous fingers, looking at him in mild surprise, and some disapproval.

"Since when does sentiment enter the game?" she asked.

"Sentiment?" he inflected. "I wasn't aware of its entry."

She shrugged mockingly. "Beware, old friend and enemy! You're losing your cleverness. Mrs. Clephane is very charming and alluring, but remember, Guy, that a charming woman has no place in the diplomatic game—save to delude the enemy. She seems to be winning with you—who, I thought, was above all our wiles and blandishments. Oh, do not smile, sir—I recognize the symptoms; I've played the innocent and the beauty in distress once or twice myself. It's all in our game—but I'm shockingly amazed to see it catch so experienced a bird as Guy Harleston."

"I'm greatly obliged, Madeline, for your shock-

ing amazement," Harleston chuckled. "Meanwhile, and returning to the letter; who has the better title to possession, Mrs. Clephane or yourself?"

"As I remarked before, either of us has a better title to the letter than yourself. Also—I have heard you say it many times, and it is an accepted rule in the diplomatic game—never meddle in what does not concern you; never help to pull another's chestnuts out of the fire."

"My dear lady, you are perfectly right! I subscribe unreservedly to the rule, and try to follow it; but you have overlooked another rule—the most vital of the code."

"What is it, pray!"

"The old rule:—Never believe your adversary. Never tell the truth—except when the truth will deceive more effectively than a lie."

"That is entirely regular, yet not applicable to the present matter. I'm *not* your adversary."

"You say you're not—yet how does that avoid the rule?"

"Won't you take my word, Guy?" she murmured.

"I am at a loss whether to take it or not," he reflected; "being so, I'm in a state of equipoise until I'm shown."

"Tell me how I can show you?" she smiled.

"I haven't the remotest idea. You know as well as I that if you were to tell me truthfully why you are here, and what you aim to accomplish, I couldn't accept your story; I should have to substantiate it by other means."

"You mean that I can't show you?" she said sorrowfully.

He nodded. "No more than I could show you were our positions reversed."

What her purpose, in all this talk, he failed to see—unless she were seeking to establish an *entente cordiale*, or to gain time. The latter was the likelier—yet time for what? They both were aware that all this discussion was twaddle—like much that is done in diplomacy; that they were merely skirmishing to determine something as to each other's position.

"I had hoped that for once you would forget business and trust me," she said softly; "in memory of old times when we worked together, as well as when we were against each other. We played

the game then for all that was in it, and neither of us asked nor gave quarter. But this isn't business, Guy,—" she had gradually bent closer until her hair brushed his cheek—"that is, it isn't business that concerns your government. You may believe this implicitly, old enemy, absolutely implicitly."

"With whom, then, has it to do?" he inquired placidly.

She sighed just a trifle—and moved closer.

"You will never tell, nor use the information?" she breathed.

"Not unless my government needs it?"

"*Peste!*" she exclaimed. "You and your government are—However, I'll tell you." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "It has to do with England, Germany, and France; at least, I so assume. It has to do with Germany or I wouldn't be in it, as you know."

"And what is the business?" he continued.

"I'm not informed—further than that it's a secret agreement between England and Germany, which France suspects and would give much to block or to be advised of. As to what the agreement embodies, I am in the dark—though I fancy

it has to do with some phase of the Balkan question."

"Why would England and Germany conclude an agreement as to the Balkan question—or any question, indeed—in Washington?" Harleston asked.

"I do not know; I'm quite ready to admit its seeming improbability. Possibly Germany desired the experience of her new Ambassador, Baron Kurtz, and didn't care to order him to Europe. Possibly, too, they chose Washington in order to avoid the spying eyes of the secret service of the other Powers. At all events, I've told you all that I know."

"Why are *you* here?" he went on.

"I'm here to watch—and to do as I'm directed. I'm on staff duty, so to speak. I'm not quite in your class, Guy. I've never operated quite alone." She looked at him thoughtfully. "We two together would make a great pair—oh, a very great pair!"

"I'm sure of it," he replied. "Sometime, I hope, we can try it."

"Why not try it now?" she said gently.

"I'm in the American secret service—and, you said, America is not involved."

"Join with Germany—and me—for this once."

He shook his head. "I serve my country for my pleasure. Germany is another matter. If, sometime, in an affair entirely personal to you, Madeline, I should be able to assist you, I shall be only too glad for the chance."

"You don't trust me," she replied sadly.

"Trust is a word unknown in the diplomatic vocabulary!" he smiled. "Moreover, I couldn't do what you want even if I believed and trusted your every word. You want the letter—the Clephane letter. I haven't it—as you know. It's in the possession of the State Department."

"Then let it remain there!" she exclaimed.

"It probably will until it's translated," he replied.

"It's in cipher?"

Harleston nodded. "Do you know what it contains?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, I don't."

"You would like to know?"

"Above everything!"

"And until then you would not have the French Ambassador advised of the letter, nor of the adventure of the cab?"

"Precisely, old friend, precisely."

"How will you prevent Mrs. Clephane telling it?"

"We must try to provide for that!" she smiled.

"Why didn't you keep her prisoner, when you had her last night?"

"That was a serious blunder; it won't happen again."

"H-u-m," reflected Harleston; and his glance sought Mrs. Spencer's and held it. "Where is Mrs. Clephane now?" he demanded.

For just an instant her eyes narrowed and grew very dark. Then suddenly she laughed—lightly, with just a suggestion of mockery in the tones.

"Mrs. Clephane—is yonder!" said she.

Harleston turned quickly. Mrs. Clephane was coming down the corridor.

XI

HALF A LIE

"SOMEWHAT unexpected, isn't it?" Harleston asked.

"To whom—you, her, or myself?" Mrs. Spencer inquired.

"To you."

"Not at *all*. I'm never surprised at anything!" Then just a trace of derision came into her face. "Won't you present me, Mr. Harleston?"

"Certainly, I will," he responded gravely, and arose.

"Another unexpected!" she mocked. "But she *is* good to look at, Guy, I must grant you that. Also—" and she laughed lightly.

"One moment," said he tranquilly, and turned toward Mrs. Clephane—who had caught sight of him and was undecided what to do.

Now, smiling adorably, she came to meet him.

"The two beauties of the season!" he thought;

and as he bowed over her hand he whispered: "Not a word of explanation *now;* and play ignorance of *everything.*—Understand?"

"I don't understand—but I'll do as you direct," she murmured.

"I want to present you to Mrs. Spencer—the woman whom, you will recall, I asked you in the red-room if you recognized. Be careful, she is of the enemy—and particularly dangerous."

"Everyone seems to be dangerous except myself," she replied. "I'm an imbecile, or a child in arms."

"*I'm* not dangerous to you," he answered.

"That, sir, remains to be proven."

"And I like your idea of the child in arms—provided it's my arms," he whispered.

Her reply was a reproving glance from her brown eyes and a shake of the head.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs. Clephane," Mrs. Spencer greeted, before Harleston could say a word. She made place on the divan and drew Mrs. Clephane down beside her. "You're Robert Clephane's widow, are you not?"

"Robert Clephane was, I believe, a distant cousin," Mrs. Clephane responded. "De Forrest

Clephane was my husband. Did you know him, Mrs. Spencer?"

"I did not. *Robert*—" with the faintest stress on the name—"was the only Clephane I knew. A nice chap, Mrs. Clephane; though, since you're not his widow, I must admit that he was a bit gay—a very considerable bit indeed."

"We heard tales of it," Mrs. Clephane replied imperturbably. "It is an ungracious thing, Mrs. Spencer, to scandalize the dead, but do you know anything of his gayness from your own experience?"

Harleston suppressed a chuckle. Mrs. Clephane would take care of herself, he imagined.

Mrs. Spencer's foot paused in its swinging, and for an instant her eyes narrowed; then she smiled engagingly, the smile growing quickly into a laugh.

"Not of my own experience, Mrs. Clephane," she replied confidentially, "but I have it from those who do know, that he set a merry pace and travelled the limit with his fair companions. It was sad, too—he was a most charming fellow. Rumour also had it that he was none too happy in his marriage, and that *his* Mrs. Clephane was something of the same sort. I've seen *her* several

times; she was of the type to make men's hearts flutter."

"It's no particular trick to make men's hearts flutter," said Mrs. Clephane sweetly.

"How about it, Mr. Harleston?" Mrs. Spencer asked.

"No trick whatever," he agreed, "provided she choose the proper method for the particular man; and some men are easier than others."

"For instance?" Mrs. Spencer inflected.

"No instance. I give it to you as a general proposition and without charge; which is something unusual in these days of tips and gratuities and subsidized graft and things equally predatory."

Mrs. Spencer arose. "The mere mention of graft puts me to instant flight," she remarked.

"And naturally even the suggestion of a crime is equally repugnant to you," Mrs. Clephane observed.

"'As a general proposition,'" Mrs. Spencer quoted.

"And general propositions are best proved by exceptions, *n'est-ce pas?*" was the quick yet drawling answer.

The two women's eyes met.

"I trust, Mrs. Clephane, we shall meet again and soon," Mrs. Spencer replied, extending her hand.

"Thank you so much," was Mrs. Clephane's answer.

Mrs. Spencer turned to Harleston with a perfectly entrancing smile.

"Good-night, Guy," she murmured.—"No, sir, not a foot; I'm going up to my apartment."

"Then we will convoy you to the elevator. Come, Mr. Harleston."

"It is only a step," Mrs. Spencer protested.

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. Clephane, "we shall not permit you to brave alone this Peacock Alley and its heedless crowd."

And putting her arm intimately through Mrs. Spencer's she went on: with Harleston trailing in the rear and chuckling with suppressed glee. It was not often that Madeline Spencer met her match!

When the car shot upward with Mrs. Spencer, Harleston gave a quiet laugh of satisfaction.

"Now shall we go in to dinner?" he asked.

Mrs. Clephane nodded.

"The table in the corner yonder, Philippe," Harleston said.

"Who is Mrs. Spencer?" she inquired, as soon as they were seated.

"You've never heard of her?"

"No—nor seen her before tonight. One is not likely to forget her; she's as lovely as——"

"Original sin?" Harleston supplied.

Mrs. Clephane smiled.

"Not at all," said she. "Diana is the one I was about to suggest."

"She may look the Diana," he replied, "but she's very far from a Diana, believe me, very far indeed."

"I am quite ready to believe it, Mr. Harleston." She lowered her voice. "I have much to tell you —and," with a quick look at him, "also something to explain."

"Your explanation is not in the least necessary if it has to do with anything Mrs. Spencer said."

"Under the circumstances I think I should be frank with you. Mrs. Spencer said just enough to make you suspect me; then she dropped it—and half a lie is always more insidious than the full truth."

"My dear Mrs. Clephane," he protested, "I assure you it is not necessary——"

"Not necessary, if one is in the diplomatic profession," she cut in. "Murder and assassination, both of men and of reputation, seem to be a portion of this horrible business, and perfectly well recognized as a legitimate means to effect the end desired. I'm not in it—diplomacy, I mean,—and I'm mighty thankful I'm not. Mrs. Spencer cold as ice, crafty as the devil, beautiful as sin, and hard as adamant, knowing her Paris and London and its scandals—I suppose she must know them in her profession—instantly recognized me and placed me as Robert Clephane's wife. For I am his wife —or rather his widow. I lied to her because I didn't intend that she should have the gratification of seeing her play win. She sought to distress and disconcert me, and to raise in your mind a doubt of my motives and my story. It may be legitimate in diplomacy, but it's dastardly and inhuman. 'Rumour also had it that he was none too happy in his marriage, and that his Mrs. Clephane was something of the same sort—she was of the type to make men's hearts flutter.' You see, I recall her exact words. And what was I to do——"

"Just what you did do. You handled the matter beautifully."

"Thank you!" she smiled. "Yet she would win in the end—with almost any other man than you. She plays for time; a very little time, possibly. I don't know. I'm new in this business—and can't see far before me. Indeed, I can't see at all; it's a maze of horrors. If I get out of this mess alive, I'll promise never to get mixed in another."

"Why not quit right now, Mrs. Clephane?" Harleston suggested.

"I won't quit under fire—and with my mission unaccomplished. Moreover, this Spencer gang have ruffled my temper—they have aroused my fighting blood. I never realized I had fighting blood in me until tonight. Mrs. Spencer's ugly insinuation, topping their attempted abduction of the evening, has done it. I'm angry all through. Don't I look angry, Mr. Harleston?"

"You're quite justified in looking so, dear lady; as well as in being so," Harleston replied. "Only you don't look it now."

"You're a sad flatterer, sir!" she smiled. "Believe me, had you seen me in the room to which they decoyed me with a false message from

you, you would believe that I can look it—very well look it."

"So that was the way of it!" Harleston exclaimed. "Tell me about it, Mrs. Clephane. I was sure that you were a prisoner somewhere in this hotel; to find you every room was being inspected."

"Why did you think I was a prisoner in the midst of all this gaiety?" she asked.

"Because I was lured by a message purporting to be from you to the ninth floor and garroted. I escaped. However, that is another story; yours first, my lady."

"You too!" she marvelled.

He nodded. "And now we are sitting together at dinner, looking at the crowd, and you're about to tell me your story."

"Thanks to you for having escaped and rescued me!" Mrs. Clephane exclaimed.

"The management devised the way."

"But *you* prompted it—you are the one I have to thank."

"If you insist, far be it from me to decline! It's well worth anything I can do to—have you look at me as you're looking now."

"I hope I'm looking half that I feel," she replied instantly.

"A modest man would be more than repaid by half the look," he returned.

"Are you a modest man?" she smiled.

"I trust so. At least, I am with some people."

"You're giving every instance of it with me, though it may be a part of the game; even the rescue may be a part of the game. You may be playing me against Mrs. Spencer, and taking advantage of my inexperience to accomplish your purposes——"

"You don't think so!" he said, with a shake of his head.

"No, I don't. And maybe that only proves my inexperience and unfitness."

For a moment he did not reply. Was *she* playing *him?* Was it a ruse of a clever woman; or was it the evidence of sincerity and innocence? It had the ring of candour and the appearance of truth. No one could look into those alluring eyes and that fascinatingly beautiful face and harbour a doubt of her absolute guilelessness. Yet was it guilelessness? He had never met guilelessness in the diplomatic game, save as a mask for treachery

and deceit. And yet this seemed the real thing. He wanted to believe it. In fact, he did believe it; it was simply the habit of his experience warning him to beware—and because it was a woman it warned him all the more. . . . Yet he cast experience aside—and also the fact that she was a woman—and accepted her story as truth. Maybe he would regret it; maybe she was playing him; maybe she was laughing behind her mask; maybe he was all kinds of a fool—nevertheless, he would trust her. It was——

"I'm glad you have decided that I'm not a diplomat—and that you will trust me," she broke in. "I'm just an ordinary woman, Mr. Harleston, just a very ordinary woman."

He held out his hand. She took it instantly.

"A very extraordinary woman, you mean, dear lady," he said gravely. "In some ways the most extraordinary that I have ever known."

"It's not in the line of diplomacy, I hope," she shrugged.

"Not the feminine line, I assure you; Madeline Spencer is typical of it, and the top of her class—which means she is wonderfully clever, inscrutable as fate, and without scruple or conscience. No,

thank God, you do not belong in the class of feminine diplomats!"

"Thank you, Mr. Harleston!" she said gently, permitting him, for an instant, to look deep into her brown eyes. "Now, since you trust me, I want to refer briefly to Mrs. Spencer's insinuation."

"Robert Clephane was all that she said—and more. Middle-aged when he married me, before a year was passed I had found that I was only another experience for him; and that after a short time he had resumed his ways of—gaiety. Not caring to be pitied, nor to be so soon a deserted wife, nor yet to admit my loss of attraction for him, I dashed into the gay life of Paris with reckless fervour. I know I was indiscreet. I know I fractured conventionality and was dreadfully compromised—but I never violated the Seventh Commandment. Robert Clephane and I were not separated—except by a locked door.

"Then one day some two years back, dreadfully mangled, they brought him home. An aeroplane had fallen with him—with the usual result. That moment saw the end of my gay life. I passed it up as completely as though it had never been.

The reason for it was gone. After a very short period of mourning, I took up the quietness of a respectable widow, who wished only to forget that she ever was married."

"I can understand exactly," said Harleston. "You shall never hear a word from me to remind you."

"I've never heard anything to remind me of the past until this alluring beauty's insinuations of a moment ago. That is why it hit me so hard, Mr. Harleston. And why did she do it? Is she jealous of you, or of me, or what?"

"She's not jealous of me!" he laughed. "I know her history; it's something of a history, too. . . . Sometime I'll tell you all about it; it's an interesting tale. Is it possible you've never heard in Paris of Madeline Spencer?"

"Never!"

"Nor of the Duchess of Lotzen?"

"Great Heavens!" she cried. "Is she the Duchess of Lotzen?"

"The same," Harleston nodded.

"H-u-m! I can understand now a little of her —No wonder I felt my helplessness before her polished poise!"

"Nonsense!" he smiled.

"Why should such an accomplished—diplomat want to injure me with you?" she asked.

"She was not seeking to injure you in the sense that you imply," he returned. "Her purpose was to put you in the same class as herself, so that I should trust you no more than I do her; to make you appear an emissary of France, in its secret service, playing the game of ignorance and inexperience for its present purpose. For you, as a personality she does not care a fig. To her you are but one of the pieces, to be moved or threatened as her purpose dictates. In the diplomatic game, my lady, we know only one side—all other sides are the enemy; and nothing, not even a woman's reputation, is permitted to stand for an instant in the way of attaining our end."

"Therefore a good woman—or one who would forget the past—has no earthly business to become involved in the game," Mrs. Clephane returned. "I shall get out of it the instant this matter of the letter is completed—and stay out thereafter. Even friendship won't lure me to it. Never again, Mr. Harleston, never again for mine!"

"I wish you would let it end right now," he urged.

"That wouldn't be the part of a good sport, nor would it be just to Madame Durrand. She trusts me."

"Then inform the French Ambassador of all the facts and circumstances and retire from the game," he advised.

"Shall I inform him over the telephone?" she asked.

"You would never get the Ambassador on the telephone, unless you were known to some one of the staff who could vouch for you."

"I don't know anyone on the staff, but Mrs. Durrand has likely communicated with the Embassy."

"If she has, she had given them a minute description of you, yet that can not be used to identify you over the telephone."

"I hesitate to go to the Embassy without the letter," she said.

"Why do you hesitate?" he smiled.

"Because I—don't want to admit defeat."

"Which of itself will serve to substantiate your story. One skilled in the game would have lost

no time in informing the Embassy of the loss of the letter. He would have realized that, next to the letter itself, the news of its seizure was the best thing he could deliver—also, it was his *duty* to advise the Embassy at the quickest possible moment. You see, dear lady, personal pride and pique play no part in this game. They are not even considered; it's the execution of the mission that's the one important thing; all else is made to bend to that single end."

"Then I should go to the French Embassy tonight with my story?" she asked.

"You should have gone this morning—the instant you were returned to the hotel! Now, unless Madame Durrand had written about you, it's a pretty good gamble that the Spencer crowd has forestalled you."

"Forestalled me! What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Spencer admitted to me that your release was someone's blunder. The normal thing was to hold you prisoner and so prevent you from communicating with the Ambassador until they had obtained the letter or defeated its purpose. That was not done; but Spencer, you may assume, has attempted to rectify their blunder—possibly

by impersonating you, and giving the Marquis d'Hausonville some tale that will fall in with her plans and gain time for her."

"Impersonating me!" Mrs. Clephane exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes. She knows all the material circumstance—witness the telephone call that inveigled you into the drive up the Avenue, *et cetera*—and she'll take the chance that you are not known to the Marquis nor any of the staff, or even the chance that Madame Durrand has not yet informed them. Indeed she may have taken precautions against her informing them. A few bribes to the hospital attendants, carefully distributed, would be sufficient. It's not everyone who could, or would venture to, pull off the coup, but with Spencer the very daring of a thing adds to its pleasure and its zest."

"You amaze me!" Mrs. Clephane replied. "I thought also that diplomacy was the gentlest-mannered profession in the world—and the most dignified."

"It is—on the surface. Fine residences, splendid establishments, brilliant uniforms, much bowing and many genuflections, plenty of parade and

glitter—everything for show. Under the surface: a supreme contempt for any code of honour, and a ruthlessness of purpose simply appalling—yet, withal, dignity, strained at times, but dignity none-the-less."

"Then it isn't even a respectable calling!" she exclaimed.

"It's eminently respectable to intimidate and to lie for one's country—and to stoop to any means to attain an end."

"And you enjoy it!" she marvelled.

"I do. It's fascinating—and I leave the disagreeable portion to others, when it has to do with those not of the profession."

"And when it has to do with those of the profession?"

"Then it's all in the game, and everything goes to win—because we all know what to expect and what to guard against. No one believes or trusts the enemy; and, as I said, everyone is the enemy but those who are arrayed with us."

"So instead of being the finest profession in the world—and the most aristocratic," Mrs. Clephane reflected, "a diplomat is, in truth, simply a false-pretence artist of an especially refined and danger-

ous type, who deals with the affairs of nations instead of the affairs of an individual."

"Pretty much," he admitted. "Diplomacy is all bluff, bluster, buncombe, and bullying; the degrees of refinement of the aforesaid bluff, *et cetera*, depending on the occasions, and the particular parties involved in the particular business."

"Again I'm well content to be simply an ordinary woman, whose chief delight and occupation is clothes and the wearing of clothes."

"You're a success at your occupation," Harleston replied.

"Some there are who would not agree with you," she replied. "However, we are straying from the question before us, which is: what shall I do about informing the Marquis d'Hausonville? Will you go with me?"

"My going with you would only complicate matters for you. The Marquis would instantly want to know what such a move on my part meant. I'm known to be in the secret service of the United States, you must remember. Furthermore, your tale will accuse me of the taking of the letter—and you see the merry mess which follows. I cannot return the letter—it's in pos-

session of the State Department. I'm far transgressing my duty by disclosing anything as to the letter. Indeed, I'm liable to be disciplined most drastically, even imprisoned, should it chance that the United States was involved."

"You've told me nothing more than you've already told the Spencer crowd," she objected.

"The difference is that the Spencer crowd are trying to obtain something to which they haven't the least right—and I'm playing the game against them. You see my peculiar position, Mrs. Clephane. I've told you what I shouldn't, because—well, because I'm sure that you will not use it to my disadvantage."

She traced the figures on her gown with the tips of her fingers, and for awhile was silent——

"It's all so involved," she reflected; "such wheels within wheels, I am completely mystified. I'm lost in the maze. I don't know whom to believe nor whom to trust—except," and suddenly she smiled at him confidently, "that I trust you."

He held her eyes with his own as he leaned forward across the table and answered very quietly:

"I shall try, dear lady, to be worthy."

"And now," she laughed, "may I tell you what happened to me when you were called to the telephone?"

"You may talk to me forever," he replied.

"And what as to the French Ambassador?" she asked.

"Bother the Marquis—he may wait until morning."

"Tomorrow, then, is beyond the forever?"

"Tomorrow may take care of itself!"

"Don't be sacrilegious, sir."

"I'll be anything you wish," he replied.

"Then be a good listener while I tell my tale. It was this wise, Mr. Harleston. Immediately after you were called away, indeed you were scarcely out of the room, a page brought a verbal message from the telephone operator that my maid had been found unconscious in the corridor of the eighth floor, and carried into 821. I hurried to the elevator. As I entered the door of 821, I was seized from behind and a handkerchief bound over my mouth and eyes. I then was tied in a chair, and a man's voice said that no further harm would come to me if I remained quiet until morning. I did not see the faces of my assailants;

there were two at least, possibly three, and one I think was a woman. My feelings and thoughts until the electrician released me may be imagined. It seemed days and days—and was somewhat uncomfortable while it lasted. When released I hurried down to look for you—or to write you a note of explanation if I couldn't find you. I'm sort of becoming accustomed to being abducted and kindred innocent amusements. I suppose the only reason they didn't kill me is that they can't kill me more than once; and to kill me now would be too early in the game."

"Killing is rarely done in diplomacy," observed Harleston, "except in large numbers; when it ceases to be diplomacy and becomes war. In fact, only bunglers resort to killing; and if the killing be known it ends one's career in the service. To have to kill to gain an end is conclusive evidence of incompetency. I mean, of course, among reputable nations. There are some thugs among the lesser Powers, just as there are thugs among the *'oi polloi.*"

"Then Mrs. Spencer is an accomplished—diplomat," Mrs. Clephane remarked.

"She is at the top of the profession,—and

as a directing force she is without a superior."

"You are very generous, Mr. Harleston!"

"I believe in giving the devil his dues. Indeed, in handling some affairs, she is in a class by herself. Her beauty and finesse and alluringness make her simply irresistible. It's a cold and stony heart that she can't get inside of and use."

"A man's heart, you mean?"

"Certainly. A man is in control of such affairs."

"Then Mrs. Spencer's presence here indicates that this letter matter is of the first importance to Germany."

"It indicates that her business is of the first importance to Germany; the letter may simply be incidental to that business, in that its delivery to the French Ambassador will embarrass or complicate that business. The latter is likely the fact."

"It grows more involved every minute," Mrs. Clephane sighed. "It's useless to try to make me comprehend. I want to hear what happened to you; such simple concrete doings are more adapted to my unsophisticated mind."

"When I returned to the telephone, you were gone," he said; "I waited awhile, then cruised through the rooms, then went back to our place and waited again. Finally I went in to dinner, leaving word to be notified the moment you returned. I was at my soup when a note was brought to me saying that you had just seen someone whom you wished to avoid, and asking me to dine with you in your apartment—and that you would explain your disappearance. I went up at once to No. 972; and there encountered pretty much similar treatment to yours,"—and he detailed the episode, down to the time she reappeared in the corridor.

She had heard him through without an interruption; at the end she said simply:

"I've absolutely no business in this affair, Mr. Harleston. When such things can happen in this hotel, in the very centre of the National Capital and among the throngs of diners and guests, it behooves an ordinary woman to seek safety in a hospital or a prison. It seems that the greater the prominence of the place, the greater the danger and the less liability to arrest."

"In diplomacy!" he acquiesced.

"Then again, I say, Heaven save me from meddling in diplomacy!"

"Amen, my lady! Moreover," he added, as they arose and passed into the corridor, "I want you as you are."

Once again their eyes met—she coloured and looked away.

"Play the game, Mr. Harleston," she reminded, "play the game! And thank you for a delicious dinner and a charming evening—and don't forget you've an appointment at ten."

"I had forgotten!" he laughed, drawing out his watch.

It was ten minutes of the hour.

"Take me to the F Street elevator and then hurry on," said she.

"And you will do nothing—and go nowhere until tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'll promise to remain here until——"

"I come for you in the morning?" he broke in.

"If I'm not abducted in the interval, I'll wait," and stepped into the car. "Good-night, Mr. Harleston!" she smiled—and the car shot upward.

"Hum!" muttered Harleston as he turned for his

coat and hat. "I may be a fool, but I'll risk it—and I think I'm *not.*"

It was but a step to Headquarters and he walked.

"The Superintendent," he said to the sergeant on duty in the outer office.

"The Chief has gone home, Mr. Harleston," was the answer.

"Home?"

"Yes, sir, two hours ago; he'll not be back tonight."

"Get him on the telephone," Harleston directed.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Harleston. . . . Here he is, sir—you can use the 'phone in the private office."

"Hello! Is that you, Ranleigh? Yes, I recognized the voice. Did you telephone me at the Chateau about six-thirty? . . . You didn't? . . . You were on your way home at that hour. . . . Yes, exactly; it was a plant. . . . Do you know Crenshaw escaped from my apartment. . . . Yes, I saw him in the Chateau this evening. . . . What? . . . Yes, better look up Whiteside at once. . . . Yes, in the Collingwood. . . . Very good; I'll meet you there. . . . All right, I'll tell the sergeant."

XII

CARPENTER

HARLESTON took a taxi to the Collingwood, arriving just as Ranleigh came up, and the two men went in together.

Whiteside was there; gagged and bound to the same chair that had held Crenshaw.

The rooms were in confusion. Everything had been gone through; clothes were scattered over the floor, papers were strewn about, drawers stood open.

They released Whiteside, and presently he was able to talk.

"When did it happen?" Ranleigh asked.

"About five o'clock this afternoon, sir," Whiteside replied, in a most apologetic tone. He knew there was no sympathy and no excuse for the detective who let his prisoner escape. "The bell rang. I went to the door—and was shot senseless by a chemical revolver. When I came to, I had exchanged places with the prisoner, and

he and another man were just departing. 'My compliments to Mr. Harleston when he returns,' said Crenshaw, as he went out."

"Describe the other man!" said Ranleigh.

"Medium sized, slender, dark hair and eyes, good features, looked like a gentleman, wore a blue sack-suit, black silk tie, and stiff straw hat."

"It's Sparrow," Harleston remarked. "Did they take anything with them?"

"Nothing whatever that I saw, sir."

"You're excused until morning," said the Chief curtly.

The detective saluted and went out.

"I am exceedingly sorry I overlooked Whiteside when I escaped from Crenshaw's garrote in the Chateau," Harleston remarked. "The simple fact is, I clean forgot him until I was talking with you on the telephone."

"It's just as well, Mr. Harleston," Ranleigh replied. "It served him right. He will be fortunate if his want of precaution doesn't cost him his job."

"No, no!" Harleston objected. "Whiteside has been punished. I intercede for him. Let him continue in his job, please."

"Very good, sir," Ranleigh acquiesced. "But he'll be informed that he owes his retention entirely to you."

When Ranleigh departed, after hearing a detailed account of the evening's doings at the hotel, Harleston sat for a little while thinking; finally he drew over a pad and made a list of things that required explanation, or seemed to require explanation, at the present stage of the matter:

"(1) The translation of the cipher letter. This should explain Madeline Spencer's connection with the affair.

"(2) Did the following persons, incidents, or circumstances have any bearing on the affair.

"(a) The lone and handsome woman, who left the Collingwood at three that morning.

"(b) The note 'à l'aube du jour' (signed) 'M,' found in Crenshaw's pocket.

"(c) The telephone call of the Chartrand apartment at 12:52 A.M., by a man who said that he was 'here' and to meet him at 10 A.M.

"(d) The persons in the Chartrand apartment the previous night.

"(e) After 1 P.M. no one entered the Colling-

wood by the usual way, and no one telephoned; how, therefore, did anyone in the Collingwood know of the incident of the cab, and of my connection with it.

"(f) Who is Mrs. Winton of the Burlingame apartments?

"(g) Why was she in Peacock Alley, wearing black and red roses, at five o'clock this afternoon?"

Harleston read over the list, folded it, and put it in his pocket-book; then he went to bed. There was plenty for him to seek, in regard to the affair of the cab of the sleeping horse, but nothing more for the Spencer gang to inspect in his apartment. Crenshaw had made a thorough job of his investigation.

In the morning he took out the list and went over it again. They all were dependent on the translation of the letter; if it did not show that the United States was concerned in the matter, the rest became merely of academic interest—and Harleston had little inclination and no time for things academic. The difficulty was, that until the key to the cipher was found nothing was academic which appeared to have any bearing on the affair.

So he sent for the manager of the Collingwood, and asked as to the Chartrands. The manager's information, which was definite if not extensive, was to the effect that the Chartrands were people of means from Denver, with excellent social position there, and with connections in Washington. They had been tenants of the Collingwood less than a week, having sublet the Dryand apartment. It was a large apartment. Mr. Chartrand was possibly forty-five, his wife thirty-eight or forty and exceedingly good-looking. There was, of course, no record kept of their visitors, nor did the house know who they were entertaining the previous evening. He was entirely sure, however, that the Chartrands were above suspicion. Mrs. Chartrand was a blonde, petite and slender; Chartrand was tall and rather stout, with red hair, and a scar across his forehead. As for the tall, slender woman who left the Collingwood at three in the morning, he did not recognize her from the description; he would, however, investigate at once.

That it might be Madeline Spencer, now that her presence in Washington was declared, Harleston thought possible. "Slender, twenty-eight, walks

as though the ground were hers," the telephone operator had said. He would get the photograph from Carpenter and let Miss Williams see it. If she recognized it as Spencer, much would be explained.

He stopped a moment at the Club, then went on to the State Department. As he turned the corner near the Secretary's private elevator, the Secretary himself was on the point of embarking and he waited.

"You want to see me?" he asked.

"Just a moment, Mr. Secretary, since you're here," Harleston responded. "I came particularly to see Carpenter. There has been a plenty doing in that matter, but nothing worthy of report to you—except one thing. Madeline Spencer is in town."

"The devil she is!" exclaimed the Secretary.

"And as beautiful, as fascinating, as sinuous, and as young as ever."

"She must be a vision."

"She is—and an extraordinarily dangerous vision."

"Only to you impressible chaps!" the Secretary confided. "She is not dangerous to me, be she

ever so beautiful, and fascinating, and sinuous, and young. When will you present me?"

"When do you suggest?" Harleston asked.

"Tomorrow, at four?"

"If I can get the lady, certainly."

"Later she'll get me, you think!" the Secretary laughed.

"If she is so minded she'll get you, I have not the least doubt," Harleston shrugged.

"Then here is where you have your doubt resolved into moonshine."

"Very well; it won't be the first time I've had the pleasure of seeing moonshine. I'll try to make the appointment for tomorrow at four."

"Self-opinionated old mountebank," Harleston thought, as he went down the corridor to Carpenter's office. "I shall enjoy watching Spencer make all kinds of an ass of him. 'You impressible chaps!—not dangerous to me!' Oh, Lord, the patronizing bumptiousness of the man! . . . Have you anything for me, Carpenter?" he asked, as he entered the latter's office.

The Fifth Assistant was sitting with his feet on his desk, a cigar in his mouth, his gaze fixed on vacancy.

"Damn your old cipher, Harleston!" he remarked, coming out of his abstraction. "It's bothered me more than anything I've tackled for years. I can't make head nor tail of it. Its very simplicity—or seeming simplicity—is what's tantalizing. It's in French. Of so much I feel sure, though I've little more than intuition to back it. As you know, this Vigenèrie, or Blocked-Out Square, cipher is particularly difficult. I've tried every word and phrase that's ever been used or discovered. We have a complete record of them. None fit this case. Can you give me anything additional that will be suggestive?"

"Here's what I've brought," Harleston replied —and related, so far as they seemed pertinent, the incidents of the previous afternoon and evening.

"A French message in an English envelope, inclosing an unmounted photograph of Madeline Spencer, a well-known German Secret Agent in Paris," Carpenter remarked slowly; "and the letter is borne by Madame Durrand to the French Ambassador. You see, my intuition was right; the letter is in French; and as it is of French authorship the key-word is French. That narrows very materially our search. Find the key-word to

the Vigenèrie cipher of the French Diplomatic Service and we shall have the translation."

"You haven't that word?" Harleston asked.

"We've got quantities of keys to French ciphers, and numerous ones to the Blocked-Out Square, but they won't translate this letter." He took up a small book and opened it at a mark. "Here are samples of the latter: *ecclesiastiques*, *coeur de roche*, *a deau eaux*, *fourreau*, *chateau d'eau*, and so on. But, alas, none of them fits; the French Government has a new key. Indeed, she changes it every month or oftener; sometimes she changes it just for a single letter."

"Then we must apply ourselves to obtaining the French key-word," Harleston remarked. "Can you—do it?"

"Maybe we can pilfer it and maybe we can't. At least we can make a brisk attempt. I will give orders at once. In the meantime, if you'll keep me advised of what happens, we may be able to piece your and my information together and make a word."

"I'll do it!" Harleston replied and started toward the door. Half-way across the room he suddenly whirled around. "Lord, Carpenter.

what an imbecile I am!" he exclaimed. "I fancy I've had the key-word all the while and never realized it."

"There are too many petticoats in this case," Carpenter shrugged.

"Never mind the petticoats!" Harleston laughed. "Get out the letter and try this phrase on it: *à l'aube du jour.*"

Without a word of comment, Carpenter set down the cipher message, letter by letter, and wrote over it *à l'aube du jour.* Then he took up a printed Blocked-Out Square and with incredible swiftness began to write the translation.

"Where did you get this 'at the break of day,' Harleston?" he asked as he wrote.

"Found it in Crenshaw's pocket-book when he returned to hold me up," Harleston replied.

"Only this isolated phrase?"

"Yes—and signed with the single initial 'M.'"

"Hump!" Carpenter commented. "Mrs. Spencer's name, I believe you said, is Madeline. I tell you there are too many women in this affair."

Suddenly he threw down the pen. "What's the use in going on with it. If you can supply a key

to this key we may arrive. Such an array of unpronounceables may be Russian, it assuredly isn't French or English. Look at it!" and he handed the translation to Harleston, who read:

A G E L U M T O N Z U C L P M U H R H U N B A R G P U H
P J I C L W Y I A O I W F P H L U O Z F R X U F J W H
W A S N V D P S

"Good Lord!" said Harleston. "I pass. Did you ever see so many consonants. I reckon my key-word isn't the key."

"Try being held up again," Carpenter advised; "you may succeed the second time. If Madeline Spencer is the holdee, no telling what you'd find."

"I'd find nothing," Harleston rejoined.

"You'd be holding a particularly lovely and attractive bit of skirts!" Carpenter smiled.

"I don't want to hold that at present."

"Not even—Mrs. Clephane?"

Harleston raised his eyebrows slightly.

"What do you know about Mrs. Clephane?" he asked.

"That she's even lovelier and more attractive than Mrs. Spencer."

"You've seen her—you know her?"

"You told me," replied Carpenter.

"I told you!—I never referred to Mrs. Clephane's appearance."

"Exactly: your careful reticence told me more than if you had used tons of words. I'm a reader of secret ciphers; you don't imagine a mere individual presents much of a problem. I tell you there are too many petticoats mixed up in this affair of the cab of the sleeping horse," Carpenter repeated. "Be careful, Harleston. Women are a menace—they spoil about everything they touch."

"Marriage in particular?" Harleston inquired.

"Exactly!"

"A bachelor's wisdom!" Harleston laughed.

"Why are you a bachelor?" Carpenter shrugged.

"Because I never——"

"—found the woman; or have been adroit enough to avoid her wiles," Carpenter cut in. "And whichever it is, you've shown your wisdom. Don't spoil it now, Harleston, don't spoil it now. Millionaires and day-labourers are the only classes that have any business to marry; the rest of us chaps either can't afford the luxury, or are

not quite poor enough to be forced to marry in order to get a servant."

"You would be popular with the suffragettes," Harleston remarked.

"Wordly wisdom of any sort is never popular with those against whom it warns."

"An aphorism!" Harleston laughed.

"Aphorism be damned; it's just plain horse sense. Don't do it, old man, don't do it!"

"Don't do what?"

"Don't fall in love with Mrs. Clephane."

"Good Lord!" Harleston exclaimed.

"Good Lord all you want, you're on the verge and preparing to leap in—and you know it. Let some other man be the life-saver, Harleston. You're much too fine a chap to waste yourself in foolishness."

"And all this," Harleston expostulated with mock solemnity, "because I neglected to include a description of Mrs. Clephane."

"Neglected with deliberation. And with you that is more significant than if you had detailed most minutely her manifold attractions. Look here, Harleston, do you want this translation for yourself or for Mrs. Clephane?"

"I want the translation because the Secretary of State wants it," Harleston replied quietly.

"Oh, don't become chilly," Carpenter returned good-naturedly. "If you permit, I'll tell you something about a Mrs. Clephane—queer name Clephane, and rather unusual—whom I used to see in Paris," glancing languidly at Harleston, "several years ago. Want to hear it?"

"Sure!" said Harleston. "Drive on and keep driving. You won't drive over me."

"It isn't a great deal," Carpenter went on, slowly tearing the consonant collection into bits, "and perchance it wasn't your Mrs. Clephane; but her name, and her beauty and charm, and Paris, and some other inferences I drew, led me to suspect that—" He completed the sentence by a wave of his hand. "She was Robert Clephane's wife—yes, I see in your face that she is your Mrs. Clephane—and he led her a merry life, though if rumour lied not she kept up with the pace he set. I saw her frequently and she was as—well you have not overdrawn the 'reticence picture.' Shall I continue?"

Harleston smiled and nodded.

"Doubtless you already know the tale," Carpenter remarked.

"I know only what Mrs. Clephane has told me," Harleston replied.

The Fifth Assistant Secretary picked up a ruler and sighted carefully along the edge.

"I seem to be in wrong, old man," he said. "Please forget that I ever said it or anything—you understand."

"My dear fellow, don't be an ass!" Harleston laughed. "I'm not sensitive about the lady; I never saw her until last night."

"Quite long enough for a man disposed to make a fool of himself—if the lady is a beauty."

"I'm disposed to hear more from you, if you care to tell me," Harleston replied. "However, jesting aside, Carpenter, what do you know? Mrs. Clephane is something of a puzzle to me, but I have concluded to accept her story; yet I'm always open to conviction, and if I'm wrong now's the time to enlighten me—the State comes first, you know."

"Are you viewing Mrs. Clephane simply as a circumstance in the affair of the cipher letter?" Carpenter asked.

"Certainly!" said Harleston.

"Then I'll give you what I heard. It's not much, and it may be false; it's for you to judge, in the light of all that you know concerning her, whether or not it affects her credibility. Mrs. Clephane went with a notoriously fast set in Paris, and her reputation was somewhat cloudy."

"I know of that," returned Harleston, "also that Clephane was a roué, and generally an exceedingly rotten lot."

"Precisely—and her conduct as to him may be quite justifiable; yet nevertheless it weakens her credibility; puts her story as to the letter under suspicion. And there is one thing more: Clephane, you know, was killed in an aeroplane smash. Did Mrs. Clephane tell you anything as to it?"

"Merely referred to it."

"Well, at a dinner the night before, he effervesced that his wife had repeatedly tried to poison him, and had told him only that evening that she hoped the flight of the morrow would be his last, and that he would fall so far it would be useless to dig for his remains. At the aviation field the following day he appeared queer, and his friends urged him not to try the flight; but he waved them aside, with the remark that maybe Mrs.

Clephane had drugged him and at last would win out. His fall came a trifle later. Suspicion followed, of course."

"How do you know all this?" Harleston asked.

"From a man who was one of his intimates, and has reformed; and from having myself been in the aviation field the day of the tragedy."

"You heard Clephane's remark?"

"I did."

"Hum!" said Harleston slowly. "A man of Clephane's habits will accuse anyone of anything at certain times. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't blame Mrs. Clephane, nor any other woman, for chucking such a husband out of the boat. It's contrary to the Acts of Assembly in such cases made and provided, but it's natural justice and amply justifiable."

"You don't credit it?" Carpenter asked.

"I can't. Moreover, didn't she change instantly her course of life and disappear from the gay world?"

"I believe that is so."

"And hasn't she remained disappeared?"

Carpenter nodded.

"Then I'm inclined to give her the benefit of the

doubt. I'll trust her, until I've seen something to warrant distrust—bearing in mind, however, what you have just told me, and the possibility of my being mistaken. I reckon I can veer quickly enough if——"

The telephone rang. Carpenter picked up the receiver.

"Yes, Mr. Harleston is here," he replied, passing the receiver across.

"Yes," said Harleston. "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Clephane. . . . Very nice, indeed. . . . Be delighted! . . . In ten minutes, I'll be there. Good-bye." He pushed back the instrument. "Mrs. Clephane has telephoned that she must see me at once. Meanwhile—the key-word, my friend."

Carpenter drummed on the table, and frowned at the door that had closed behind Harleston.

"The man's bewitched," he muttered. "However, I threw a slight scare into him, and maybe it will make him pause; he is not quite devoid of sense. Bah! All women are vampires."

XIII

THE MARQUIS

"MRS. CLEPHANE will be right down, Mr. Harleston," said the telephone operator.

A moment later the elevator flashed into sight, and Mrs. Clephane stepped out and came forward with the languorously lithe step, perfectly in keeping with her slender figure. She wore a dark blue street suit, and under her small hat her glorious hair flamed like an incandescent aureole. She greeted Harleston with an intimate little nod and smile.

"You're good to come!" she said.

"To myself, I think I'm more than good," he answered.

"No, no, sir!" she smiled. "No more compliments between us, if we're to be friends."

"We're to be *friends*," he returned.

"*Ergo*," she replied. "Sit down just a minute, will you?"

"I'll sit down for a month, if you're——"

"*Ergo! Ergo!*" she reminded him.

"I had not gotten used to the unusual restriction," he exclaimed. "You're the first woman ever I met or heard of who dislikes compliments."

"I don't dislike compliments, Mr. Harleston; but compliments, it seems, are given in diplomacy for a purpose; and as I don't understand anything of diplomacy we would better cut them out—until we have finished with diplomacy. Then you may offer as many as you like, and I'll believe them or not as I'm minded."

"Have it as you wish!" he smiled, looking into the brown eyes with frank admiration.

"Compliments may be conveyed by looks as well as by words," she reproved.

"But of the feeling that prompts the look you can be in no doubt. Moreover, a look is silent."

"Nonsense," said she. "Besides, I want to ask you a favour. You see, I'm prepared to go out—and I want you to go with me. Will you do it?"

"It will have to be mightily against my conscience to make me refuse *you*," Harleston replied.

"I'm glad you recognize a conscience," she remarked.

"I refer to my diplomatic conscience."

"And a diplomatic conscience is a minus quantity," she observed.

"What is it you would of me, dear lady?" he asked.

"I would that you should go with me to the French Ambassador, and help me to explain the—now don't say you won't, Mr. Harleston——"

"My dear Mrs. Clephane, it is—" he began.

"It is *not* impossible!" she declared. "Why won't you do it?"

"For your sake as well as for my own," he explained. "America and France are not working together in this matter, and for me to accompany you would result simply in your being obliged to explain *me* as well as the letter, besides leading to endless complications and countless suspicions. Didn't I expound this last evening?"

"You did—also much more; but I've thought over it almost the whole night, and I simply must get this miserable letter off my mind. Perhaps Mrs. Spencer has forestalled me with the Ambassador, and has given him such a tale as will insure

my being shown the door; nevertheless I'll risk it."

"Why don't you get in communication with your friend Madame Durrand," Harleston suggested, "and have her, if she hasn't done so already, identify you to the Marquis?"

"I shall, if the Marquis is sceptical. I'll admit that I'm pitiably foolish, but I don't want Mrs. Durrand to know how I've bungled her matter until the bungle is corrected."

"I can quite understand," said Harleston gently.

"Oh, I know you are right," she murmured, "yet I'm afraid to go alone."

"Take some other friend with you; some well-known man who can vouch for your identity."

"I know no one in Washington except the friends at the Shoreham, and they are not residents here."

"Are you acquainted with any prominent woman?"

"No! I've lived in Europe for years—and while I have met over there women from Washington, it's been only casually. They won't recollect me, any more than I would them, for purposes of vouchment or identification."

"Then go alone."

"I will. It is the right thing to do. Yesterday I was thinking that you had the letter and could return it to me. I waited. Today I can appreciate your reason for withholding it—likewise the necessity for me to go to the Ambassador with my story. And I shall tell him the *whole* story; he may believe it or not as he is inclined. I'm only a volunteer in this affair, and I've decided that for me the course of discretion and frank honesty is much wiser than silently fighting back. Furthermore, it does not estop me from fighting the Spencer gang."

"You have made a wise decision," Harleston commented. "Tell the Ambassador, and be quit of the affair—and don't fight the Spencer gang, Mrs. Clephane; it is not worth while."

She arose, and he went with her down the corridor and up the steps to the entrance.

"Every action is suspected and distrusted in diplomacy," he said, "therefore I may not accompany you. Someone would be sure to see us and report to the Embassy that I had brought you—the natural effect of which would be to make the Marquis disbelieve your tale. For you see,

until we have translated the letter, we cannot assume that America is not concerned."

"And you will not think ill of me for disclosing your part in the affair?" she asked.

"Quite the contrary," he smiled. "Moreover, it is the course for you to pursue; to hold back a single thing as to me will result only in distrust. Indeed, implicating me will help substantiate your story."

"You're very good and very thoughtful," she murmured—and once more suffered him to look deep into her eyes.

"I am very willing for you to think me both," he replied. "Now I'm going to call a taxi at the Fourteenth Street exit, and follow yours up Sixteenth Street until I see you at the French Embassy. Tell your chauffeur to drive down to Twelfth Street, up to H and then out to Sixteenth. My taxi will be loitering on Sixteenth and will pick up yours as it passes and follow it to the Embassy. Once there you're out of danger of the Spencer gang. And let me impress you with this fact: tell the story to someone of the staff. If you fail to get to the Ambassador, get a Secretary or an Attaché."

"I'll try to find someone who will listen!" she laughed.

"And I rather fancy you will be successful," he smiled. "It would be a most unusual sort of man who won't both listen and look."

"Careful, Mr. Harleston!" she reminded.

He put her in the taxi; bowed and turned back into the hotel—wondering why he had ever fancied Madeline Spencer.

Mrs. Clephane gave her orders to the chauffeur, ending with the injunction to drive slowly.

As they swung into Sixteenth Street, a taxi standing before St. John's Episcopal Church followed them; and Mrs. Clephane recognized Harleston as its occupant.

At the French Embassy she descended and rang the bell, and was instantly admitted by a liveried footman.

"I wish to see his Excellency the Ambassador!" she said, speaking in French.

The flunky took her card and bowed her into a small reception room.

After a moment or so a dapper young man entered, her card in his fingers.

"Messes Cleephane?" he inquired.

"I am Mrs. Clephane," she replied in French. "I wish to see his Excellency the Ambassador on a most important matter."

"You have an appointment with his Excellency?" he asked, this time in French.

"You are—" she inflected.

"His secretary, madame," the young man bowed.

"No, I have not an appointment," she replied, "but I come from Madame Durrand who was the bearer of a cipher letter from the Foreign Minister. Madame Durrand was injured as she was about to take train in New York, and gave me the letter to deliver."

The secretary looked at her blandly and smiled faintly.

"You have the letter with you?" he asked.

"Again, no," she replied. "It is to explain its loss, and to warn the Ambassador that I am here."

"His Excellency is exceedingly busy—will you not relate the circumstances to me?"

"My instructions from Madame Durrand are most specific that I am to deal only with his Excellency," Mrs. Clephane explained—with such a dazzling smile that the secretary's eyes fairly

popped. "Won't you please tell him I'm here, and that I have a luncheon engagement at one o'clock."

The secretary hesitated. Again the smile smote him full in the face—and he hesitated no longer.

"Come with me, Madame Clephane," he replied. "His Excellency is occupied at present, but I'll deliver your message."

Once more the smile—as opening the door for her he bowed her into an inner office, and carefully placed a chair for her.

"A moment, madame," he whispered, disappearing through an adjoining doorway.

Whereat Mrs. Clephane sighed with amused complacency, and waited.

Presently the door opened and the secretary appeared. "His Excellency will receive you, Madame Clephane," he said.

"I thank you—oh, so much!" she whispered as she passed him—and the look that went with the words cleared all her scores—and almost finished him.

So much for a smile—when a beautiful woman smiles, and smiles in just the right way, and especially when the man smiled on is a Frenchman.

The Ambassador was standing by a large,

flat-topped desk in the centre of the room, his back was to the light, which was generously given in all its effulgence to his visitors. He was a small man and slight of build, intensely nervous, with well-cut features, gray hair—what there was of it—and a tiny black moustache curled up at the ends but not waxed.

He came briskly forward and extended his hand.

"My dear Madame Clephane," he said in French, leading her to a chair, "how can I serve you?"

"By listening to my story, your Excellency, and believing it," Mrs. Clephane answered,— "and at the end not being too severe on me for my misfortune and ignorance."

"That will not be difficult," he bowed, with a frank look of admiration. "You come from Madame Durrand, I believe?"

"Yes—you know Madame Durrand?"

The Marquis nodded. "I have met her several times."

"I'm glad!" said she. "It may help me to prove my case."

"Madame is her own proof," was the answer.

For which answer he drew such a smile from

Edith Clephane that in comparison the secretary's smile was simply as nothing.

"Your Excellency overwhelms me," she replied. "I'm positively trembling with apprehension lest I fail to—" she dropped into English—"make good."

He laughed lightly. "You will make good!" he replied, also in English. "Pray proceed."

And Mrs. Clephane told him the whole story, from the time she met Madame Durrand on the steamer to the present moment—omitting only the immaterial personal portions occurring between Harleston and herself, and the fact that his taxi had escorted hers until she was at the Embassy.

Her narrative was punctuated throughout by the Marquis's constant exclamations of wonder or interest; but further than exclaiming, in the nervous French way, he made no interruption.

And on the whole, she told her story well; at first she was a little nervous, which made her somewhat at a loss for words; yet that soon passed, and her tale flowed along with delightful ease.

"Now you have been a wonderfully gracious listener, your Excellency," she ended, "ask what-

ever questions you wish in regard to the matter; I shall be only too glad to answer if I am able."

"Madame's narrative has been most detailed and most satisfactory," the Marquis answered. "But let me ask you to explain, if you can, why Madame Durrand has not made a written report of this matter to the Embassy?"

"I have no idea—unless she is ill."

"Broken bones do not usually prevent one from writing, or dictating, a letter."

"It *is* peculiar!" Mrs. Clephane admitted.

"What is the name of the hospital?" the Marquis asked.

"In the hurry and excitement I quite forgot to ask the name," she replied. "The station officials selected it. I was thinking of her—Madame Durrand, I mean—more than the name of the hospital. I don't even know the street; though it's somewhere in the locality of the station. It is dreadfully stupid of me, your Excellency, not to know—but I don't."

"We can remedy that very readily," he said, and pressed a button. His secretary responded. "Telephone our Consul-General in New York to ascertain immediately from the railroad officials

the hospital to which Madame Durrand, who broke her ankle and wrist in the Pennsylvania Station, at ten o'clock on Monday, was taken."

The secretary saluted and withdrew.

"Might not our friends the enemy have bribed someone to suppress Madame Durrand's letter or wire?" Mrs. Clephane asked.

"Very possibly. It is entirely likely that they wouldn't be apt to stop with the accident."

"You think they were responsible for Madame Durrand's fall?" she exclaimed.

"Have you forgotten the man who jostled Madame Durrand?" the Marquis reminded.

"To be sure! How stupid not to think of it. You see, your Excellency, I am not accustomed to the ways of diplomacy and to assuming every one's a rogue until he proves otherwise."

"You have a poor opinion of diplomats!" he smiled.

"Not of diplomats, only of their professional ways. And as they all have the same ways, it's fair, I suppose, among one another."

"Did you tell Monsieur Harleston your opinion of our vocation?" he asked.

"I did—somewhat more emphatically."

"And what, if you care to tell, did he say?"

"He quite agreed with me; he even went further."

"Wise man, Harleston!" the Marquis chuckled.

"Implying that he was not sincere?"

The Marquis threw up his hands. "Perish the thought! I imply that he is a man of rare discrimination and admirable taste."

"Now won't you please tell me, your Excellency, if you credit, no, if you *believe*, my story—and don't be a diplomat for the telling."

"My dear Madame Clephane, I do believe your tale—it bears the impress of truth in what you've not done, as well as in what you've done. Had you ever been in the service you would recognize my meaning. That the abductors did not triumph was due first to their carelessness, and second to chance, in the person of Monsieur Harleston. He plays the game; and is violating no rule of diplomacy by his course in the affair. Indeed he would be recreant to his country's service were he to do otherwise. And France would infinitely prefer the United States to have the letter rather than Germany. It's unfortunate, but it's not as unfortunate as it might be."

"You make me feel much, oh, so much better!" Mrs. Clephane replied. "I feared lest my blunder could never be forgiven nor forgotten; and that Madame Durrand would be held responsible and would never again be trusted."

The Ambassador smiled and shook his head. "I think you need not worry," he replied.

"And I'm perfectly sure, your Excellency, that if the United States is neither directly or indirectly concerned in the matter of the letter, and if you were to submit a translation of the letter to prove it, Mr. Harleston will deliver to you the original."

"Did Monsieur Harleston tell you so?" the Marquis smiled.

"No, oh, no! I only thought that——"

"—in this one instance diplomats would trust each other?" he interjected. "Alas, no! Monsieur Harleston would only assume the translation to be false and given for the sole purpose of deception. I should assume exactly the same, were our positions reversed."

"Couldn't you prove your translation by giving him the key to the cipher?" she asked.

"My dear madame," the Marquis smiled, "such a thing would be unprecedented—and would mean

my instant dismissal from the service, and trial for treason."

She made a gesture of defeat. "Well, you can at least have the letter repeated by cable."

"Also we can cable the government to dispatch another letter," the Ambassador soothed. "There are plenty of ways out of the difficulty, so don't give yourself any concern—and the United States is welcome to the letter. It will be a far day, I assure you, ere its cipher bureau translates it."

He glanced at the clock. Mrs. Clephane arose.

"I'm sorry for the mess I have made," she said.

"Don't give it a thought," he assured her. "If you can help us, you will be where?"

"I will be at the Chateau until this matter is straightened out—and subject to your instant call."

"Good—you are more than kind; France appreciates it."

He took her hand, escorted her with gracious courtesy to the door, and bowed her out.

Then he stepped to his desk and rang twice.

The First Secretary entered.

"Did you hear her entire story?" the Marquis asked.

"I did, sir," the First Secretary replied.

"You believe it?"

"Absolutely."

"Then set Pasquier to work to ascertain what this Madame Spencer is about. Let him report as quickly as he has anything definite. I'll cable Paris at once as to the letter."

XIV

THE SLIP OF PAPER

MADELINE SPENCER, leaning languidly against the mahogany table in the corner of the drawing-room, drummed softly with her finger tips as she listened.

"What is the use of it all?" Marston was asking. "We can't get the letter. Harleston evidently told the truth; he has turned it over to the State Department, so why not be content that it's there, and let well enough alone?"

"I've been letting well enough alone by occupying them with the notion that the letter is the thing most desired." Mrs. Spencer returned. "Muddying the water, as it were, so as to obscure the main issue and get away with the trick. Direct your attention here, if you please, gentlemen! Meanwhile we escape from the other end."

"Mrs. Clephane was at the French Embassy this afternoon," he observed.

"At last she had a glimmering of sense!" Mrs. Spencer laughed. "Why she didn't beat it there direct from the train I can't imagine. Such ignorance is a large asset for those of us who know. I had thought of impersonating her and amusing myself with d'Hausonville, but I concluded it wasn't worth while. It *riles* me, however, that the affair was so atrociously bungled by Crenshaw and the others. What possessed them to release Mrs. Clephane once they had her?—and what in Heaven's name made them overlook the letter in the cab?"

"Search me!" Marston replied.

"There is no occasion to search you, Marston," she smiled. "I shouldn't find very much except—placidity."

"Placidity has its advantages," he smiled back.

"It has; that's why I asked the Chief for you. You were not as happy in your choice of assistants, Marston. They are a stupid lot. You may send them back to New York. We'll handle this matter ourselves, with Mrs. Chartrand's involuntary assistance."

"Very good, madame!" said Marston. "The trouble, you see, came with that chap Harleston's

butting into the affair. Who would have foreseen that he would happen along just at that particular moment and scoop the letter without turning a hair. It was rotten luck sure."

"It was all easy enough if the blundering fools had only exercised an atom of sense," Mrs. Spencer retorted. "Mrs. Clephane couldn't deceive a normal two-year-old child; she is as transparent as plate glass."

"She was clever enough to get rid of the letter in the cab, and to give them the plausible story that it was locked in the hotel safe. And the hotel safe was the reasonable place for her to leave the letter until she had seen the Ambassador, and someone from the Embassy could return with her and get the letter."

"Granted—if Mrs. Clephane were a wise woman and in the service. She isn't wise and she isn't in the service; and both these facts are so apparent that he who runs may read. She played the Buissards for fools and won. If they had exercised the intelligence of an infant, they'd have known that she had the letter with her when she left the hotel. You got a glimmer of light when you thought of the cab—and Mrs. Clephane told

you that Mr. Harleston had stopped and looked at the sleeping horse and then started him toward Dupont Circle. You came to me to report—and I, knowing Harleston, solved the remainder of the mystery. But with Harleston's entry the affair assumed quite a different aspect; and it is no reflection on you, Marston, that your expedition to his apartment didn't succeed; though somewhat later Crenshaw did act as a semi-reasonable man, and secured the letter—only to foozle again like an imbecile. The play in the hotel last night, as schemed by us, should have gone through and eliminated Clephane and Harleston for a time; but Harleston upset things by his quick action and sense of danger——moreover, he guessed as to Clephane, for the management got wise and made a search, and the dear lady found Harleston and me in Peacock Alley—and she pre-empted him."

Marston blinked and said nothing.

"Why don't you say something?" she asked sharply.

"What is there to say that you don't already know," he replied placidly.

"Very little, Marston, about the subject in

hand," she replied curtly. "And now let us see how matters stand to date. First—the French Ambassador knows that a cipher letter to him from his Foreign Minister has been intercepted and is in the hands of the American State Department. Second—as it is in letter cipher, there isn't much likelihood of it being translated. Third—the matter covered by the letter must be something that they are reluctant to send by cable; for you know, Marston, that the United States, in common with European nations, requires all telegraph and cable companies to forward immediately to the State Department a copy of every cipher message addressed to a foreign official. Maybe they are not able to translate it, but of that the sending nation cannot be sure and it makes it very careful, particularly when the local government is affected. Fourth—France will have to choose between consuming a week in getting another letter from Paris to Washington, or she will have to chance the cable with the risk of America learning her message."

"What do you think France will do?" Marston asked.

"If the letter concerned my mission, she will

risk the cable," Mrs. Spencer replied. "She would far rather disclose the affair to the United States, than to let Germany succeed."

"May she not be content now to warn the United States?" suggested Marston.

"It's quite possible. All depends whether the letter concerns my mission. We have been informed by the Wilhelm-strasse that it probably does, and directed to prevent its delivery to the French Ambassador. We've succeeded in preventing, but bungled it over to the United States —the one country that we shouldn't have aroused. What in the devil's name ails your assistants, Marston—particularly Crenshaw?"

"To be quite candid," Marston replied, "he had a grouch; he thought that Sparrow and I flub-dubbed the matter of the cab, and deliberately tried to lose him when we went to the Collingwood. And when he did come, he drew his gun on us until he understood."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"He thought that it was a scheme of Sparrow to injure him in your eyes. It seems that he and Sparrow are jealous of your beautiful eyes."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"What have I, or my beautiful eyes, to do with Crenshaw and Sparrow?"

"What usually happens to the men who are associated with you in any enterprise: they get daffy over you."

"Because they get daffy over me is no excuse for stupid execution of the business in hand," she shrugged. "*You* never have been guilty of stupidity, Marston."

"Because I've managed never to be a fool about you—however much I have been tempted to become one."

"Have been, Marston?" she inflected.

"Have been—and *am*," he bowed. "I'm not different from the rest—only——"

She curled herself on a divan, and languidly stretched her slender rounded arms behind the raven hair.

"Only what, Marston?" she murmured.

"Only I know when the game is beyond me."

"So, to you, I'm a game?"

"Of an impossible sort," he replied. "I admire at a distance—and keep my head."

"And your heart, too, *mon ami?*"

"My heart is the servant of my head. When it

ceases so to be, I shall ask to be detached from the Paris station."

"Are you satisfied with your present assignment?"

"Much more than satisfied; very much more than satisfied."

She held out her hand to him, and smiled ravishingly.

"We understand each other now, Marston," she said simply; which tied Marston only the tighter to her—as she well knew. And Marston knew it, too. Also he knew that he had not the shade of a chance with her—and that she knew that he knew it. It was Madeline Spencer's experience with men that such as she tried for she usually got. There were exceptions, but them she could count on the fingers of one hand. Harleston—though for a time he was on the verge of submission—was an exception. And for that she was ready to rend him at the fitting opportunity; the more so because her own feelings had been aroused. As they were once before with Armand Dalberg—who had calmly put her in her place, and tumbled her schemes about her ears.

All her life there would be a weak spot in her

heart for Dalberg; and, such is the peculiarly inconsistent nature of the female, a hatred that fed itself on his scorn of her.

She had dared much with Dalberg—and often; and always she had lost. The Duke of Lotzen was only a means to an end: money and exquisite ease. Left with ample wealth on his decease, she, for her excitement and to be in affairs, had mixed in diplomacy, and had quickly become an expert in tortuous moves of the tortuous game.

Then one day she encountered Harleston, and bested him. With a rare good nature for a diplomat, he had taken his defeat with a smile, at the same time observing her manifold attractions with a careful eye and an indulgent mind for the past. Which caused her to look at him again, and to think of him frequently; and at last to want him for her own—after a little while. And he had appeared not averse to the wanting—after a little while. Now, just as he was about to succumb, he was suddenly whisked away by another woman —that woman simply a later edition of herself: the same figure, the same poise, the same methods, the same allurements; but younger in years, fresher, and, she admitted it to herself, less

acquainted with the ways of men. And now she had lost him; and never would she be able to get him back. Another woman had filched him from her—filched him forever from her, she knew.

Therefore she hated Mrs. Clephane with a glowing hate.

"Have you seen the—*man?*" Marston asked, when her attention came back to him.

She nodded. "I've had a communication from him."

"Anything doing?"

"Not yet. He will duly apprise me. Meanwhile we, or rather I, am to remain quiet and wait expectantly."

"He thinks you are alone?"

"Of course. He would be off like a colt if he thought that I had a corps of assistants."

"The longer the delay the more chance France has to repeat the letter by cable," Marston remarked.

"Certainly—but I shan't be fool enough to tell him so, or anything as to the letter. He would end negotiations instantly."

"When are you to see him?"

"This afternoon at three."

"At Chartrands?"

"No, in Union Station."

"It's a long way to go," Marston observed.

"So I intimated, but without avail."

"Is he afraid?"

"No, only inexperienced in deception and over cautious. Moreover, it is a serious business."

"Particularly since Harleston is on the trail?" Marston added.

Mrs. Spencer nodded again. "We'll pray that he does not uncover the matter until we are up and away."

"If we pray, it should be effective!" Marston laughed.

"It likely will be—one way or the other," she returned drily. "However, if we are careful, a prayer more or less won't effect much damage. It's really up to the—man in the case. If he can get away with it, we can manage the rest."

"And if he can't?"

"Then there will be nothing on us, unless the Clephane letter is translated and implicates me by name—or Paris resorts to cable. If it were not for France's meddling, it would be ridiculously

simple so far as we are concerned; everything would be up to the man."

"And you do not know who the man is, nor what he is about to betray?" Marston asked.

"I do not—nor am I in the least inquisitive, despite the fact that I'm a woman. I haven't even so much as tried to guess. I was ordered here under express instructions; which are to meet someone who will communicate with me by letter in which a certain phrase will occur. Thereafter I am to be guided by him and the circumstances until I receive from him a certain package, when I am instantly to depart the country and hurry straight to Berlin. Whether I am to receive a copy of a secret treaty between our friends or our enemies, a diplomatic secret of high importance, a report on the fortifications or forces of another nation, or what it is, I haven't the slightest idea. It's all in the game—and the game fascinates me; its dangers and its uncertainty. Some other nation wants what Germany is about to get; some other nation seeks to prevent its betrayal; some other nation seeks to block us; someone else would even murder us to gain a point—and our own employer would not raise a

hand to seek retribution, or even to acknowledge that we had died in her cause. They laud the soldier who dies for his flag, but he who dies in the secret service of a government is never heard of. He disappears; for the peace or the reputation of nations his name is not upon the public rolls of the good and faithful servants. It's risky, Marston; it's thankless; it's without glory and without fame; nevertheless it's a fascinating game; the stakes are incalculable, the remuneration is the best."

"You're quite right as to those high up in the service," Marston remarked, "the remuneration, I mean, but not as to us poor devils who are only the pawns. We not only have no glory nor honour, but considering the danger and what we do we are mightily ill paid, my lady, mightily ill paid. The fascination and danger of the game, as you say, is what holds us. At any rate, it's what holds me—and the pleasure of working sometimes with you, and what that means."

"And we always win when together because we are in accord," she smiled, holding out her hand to him. "Team work, my good friend, team work!"

He took the hand, and bending over raised it to his lips with an air of fine courtesy and absolute devotion.

"And we shall win this time, Marston," she went on, "we shall sail for Europe before the week is ended—I'm sure of it."

"I shall be satisfied if we never sail—or sail always," he returned, and slowly released her fingers and stepped back.

She paid him with a ravishing smile; and Madeline Spencer, when she wished, could smile a man into fire—and out again. It was too soon for the "out again" with Marston. He was very useful—he was not restless, nor demanding, nor sensitive, nor impatient of others, nor jealous. He was like a faithful dog, who adores and adores, and pleads only to be allowed to adore. Moreover, he was a capable man and trustworthy; dependable and far above his class. Therefore she took care that his chains should be silken, yet at the same time that he be not permitted to graze too far afield.

"I wonder," Marston was saying, after a little thought, "if Carpenter, the Chief of the Secret Bureau of their State Department, might be purchasable—if we made him a good stiff bid?"

"I don't know," she answered. "It isn't likely, however; he is too old and tried an official to be venal. Furthermore we haven't any money at hand, and my instructions are to act independently of the German Embassy, and under no circumstances whatever to communicate with it. In such business as we are engaged, the Embassy never knows us nor of our plans. They don't dare to know; and they will calmly deny us if we appeal to them."

"The money might be arranged," Marston suggested. "You could cable to Berlin for it—and have it cabled back."

"It might be done," said she thoughtfully. "You mean to try Carpenter for a copy of the cipher letter?"

"It won't do any particular harm, as I see it; it can't make us any worse off and it may give us the letter. It's worth the trial, it seems to me."

"But if Carpenter has not succeeded in finding the key-word, how will the letter help? Do you expect to bribe the French Embassy also?"

"It may not be necessary," he replied. "I know a number of keys of French ciphers; one of them may fit."

"Very well," said she quietly; "you are empowered to have a try at Carpenter."

"Good—I'll start after it at once. Any further orders, madame?"

"None till evening," again holding out her hand—and again smiling him into kissing it adoringly.

"A useful man, Marston!" she reflected when the door closed behind him. "And one who never presumes. A smile pays him for anything, and keeps him devoted to me. Yes, a very useful and satisfactory man. His idea of corrupting Carpenter may be rather futile; and he may get into a snarl by trying it, but," with a shrug of her shapely shoulders, "that is his affair and won't involve me. And if he should prove successful, the new French key-word which the Count, the dear Count, gave me just before I left Paris, may turn the trick."

The Count de M——was confidential secretary to the Foreign Minister, and he had slipped her the bit of paper containing the key-word at a ball, two evenings before she sailed on her present mission. He was not aware that she was sailing, nor was she; the order came so suddenly that she and her

maid had barely time to fling a few things in a couple of steamer trunks and catch the last train. She had fascinated the Count; for a year he had been one of her most devoted, but most discreet, admirers. He also was exceedingly serviceable. Hence she took pains to hold him.

Languidly she reached for her little gold mesh bag—the one thing that never left her—and from a secret pocket took several slips of paper.

"Why, where is it!" she exclaimed, looking again with greater care. . . . "The devil! I've lost it!"

However, after a moment of thought, she recalled the key-word, and the rule that he whispered to her—also the squeeze he gave her hand, and the kiss with the eyes. The Count had fine eyes—he could look much, very much. . . . She smiled in retrospection. . . . Yet how did she drop that bit of paper—and where? . . . Or did she drop it? . . . All the rest were there. It was very peculiar. . . . She had referred to the De Neviers slip on last Saturday—and she distinctly remembered that the Count's was there at that time. Consequently she must have dropped it on Sunday when she was studying the Rosny matter,

and then she was in this room—and Marston and Crenshaw and Sparrow were in the next room.—H-u-m. . . . Well, the Count wrote in a woman's hand; and the finder cannot make anything out of the words:

À l'aube du jour.

XV

IDENTIFIED

So it happened, that on the same day and practically at the same hour Carpenter gave instructions looking to the pilfering of the French private diplomatic cipher, Marston began to lay plans to test Carpenter's venality, and Madeline Spencer betook herself to Union Station to meet the man-in-the-case, whose face she had never seen, and whose name she did not know.

She went a roundabout way, walking down F Street and stopping to make some trifling purchases in two or three shops. She could not detect that she was being followed, but she went into a large department store, and spent considerable time in matching some half-dozen shades of ribbon. On the way out she stepped into a telephone booth, and directed the dispatcher at the Chateau to send a taxi to Brentano's for Mrs. Williams. By the time she had leisurely crossed the street the taxi

was there; getting in, she gave the order to drive to Union Station by way of Sixteenth Street and Massachusetts Avenue. As she passed the Chateau, she saw Mrs. Clephane and Harleston coming out; a bit farther on they shot by in a spanking car.

She drew back to avoid recognition; but they were too much occupied with each other, she observed, even to notice the occupant of the humble but high-priced taxi. At Scott Circle their car swung westward and disappeared down Massachusetts Avenue; she turned eastward, toward tomorrow's rising sun, Union Station, and the rendezvous—with hate in her heart for the woman who had displaced her, and a firm resolve to square accounts at the first opportunity. Mrs. Clephane might be innocent, likely was innocent of any intention to come between Harleston and her, but that did not relieve Mrs. Clephane from punishment, nor herself from the chagrin of defeat and the sorrow of blasted hopes. The balance was against her; and, be it man or woman, she always tried to balance up promptly and a little more—when the balancing did not interfere with the business on which she was employed.

Madeline Spencer, for one of her sort, was exceptional in this: she always kept faith with the hand that paid her.

At Union Station she dismissed the taxi and walked briskly to the huge waiting-room. There she dropped the briskness, and went leisurely down its long length to the drug stand, where she bought a few stamps and then passed out through the middle aisle to the train shed, inquiring on the way of an attendant the time of the next express from Baltimore. To his answer she didn't attend, nevertheless she thanked him graciously, and seeing the passengers were beginning to crowd through the gates from an incoming train she turned toward them, as if she were expecting someone. Which was true—only it was not by train.

It had been five minutes past the hour, by the big clock in the station, when she crossed the waiting-room; by the time the crowd had passed the gates, and there was no excuse for remaining, another five had gone. The appointment was for three exactly. She had not been concerned to keep it to the minute, but the man should have been; as a woman, it was her prerogative to be careless as to such matters; moreover she had

found it an advantage, as a rule, to be a trifle late, except with her superiors or those to whom either by position or expediency it was well to defer. With such she was always on time—and a trifle more.

As she turned away, a tall, fine-looking, well set-up, dark-haired, clean-cut, young chap, who had just rounded the news-stand, grabbed off his hat and greeted her with the glad smile of an old acquaintance.

"Why, how do you do, Mrs. Cuthbert!" he exclaimed. "This is an unexpected pleasure, and *most opportune.*"

There was a slight stress on the last two words: —the words of recognition.

"Delightful, Mr. *Davidson!*" she returned—which continued the recognition—taking his extended hand and holding it.

"Can't I see you to your car, or carriage, or whatever you're using?" he asked.

"You may call a taxi," she replied; "and you may also come with me, if you've nothing else to do."

"I'm too sorry. There has been a—mixup, and it is *impossible* now, Mrs. Cuthbert. *I have an*

important appointment at the Capitol." Which completed the recognition.

"When can you come to see me?" she asked. "I'm at the Chateau."

"I hope tomorrow, if I'm not suddenly tied up. You will be disengaged?"

"I've absolutely nothing on hand for tomorrow," she replied.

"Fine!" he returned. "I think I can manage to come about one and take you out for luncheon."

"That will be charming!" she smiled.

"Where would you like to go—to the Rataplan?"

"Wherever you suggest," she replied. "I'll leave it to you where we shall go and what we shall have."

"You're always considerate and kind," he averred. "If nothing untoward occurs, it will be a fine chance to talk over old times, to explain everything, and to arrange for the future."

"That will be charming!"

"And unless I am disappointed in a *certain matter*, I shall have a surprise for you."

"I shall welcome the surprise."

"We both shall welcome it, I think!" he laughed. "It seems a long time since I've seen you, Madeline," he added.

"It seems a long time to me, too, Billy. We must do better now, old friend. Come to Paris and we'll make such a celebration of it that the Boulevards will run with—gaiety."

"I shall come. Meanwhile—tomorrow." He raised his stick to the taxi dispatcher. "I'm sorry to leave you," he confided to her.

"Let me take you as far as the Capitol," she urged.

"Not today. Wait until I come to Paris—then you may take me where you will and how."

"I like you, Billy!" she exclaimed.

"And I've something more to tell you," he whispered, as he put her in and closed the door. "The Chateau!" he said to the driver then stepping back, he doffed his hat and waved his hand.

"Yes, I like you, Mr. Davidson," she smiled, as the taxi sped away, "but I'll like you better when the present business is completed and I'm in Paris—without you."

He was a handsome chap enough, and he would have considerable money when the present business

was completed, yet, somehow he did not appeal, even to her mercenary side. Moreover she no longer dealt in his sort. Time was when he would have served admirably, but she was done with plucking for plucking's sake. She plucked still, but neither so ruthlessly nor so omnivorously as of yore. She did not need; nor was she so gregarious in her tastes. She could pick and choose, and wait—and have some joy of *Him* and take her time; be content not to pluck him clean, and so retain his friendship even after he had been displaced. With her now it was the man in high office or of high estate at whom she aimed—and her aim was usually true. Neither with one of her tastes and tendencies was monogamy apt to be attractive nor practiced—though at times it subserved her expediency. At present, it was the Count de M——, an English Cabinet Minister, and a Russian Grand Duke;—but *discreetly*, oh, so discreetly that none ever dreamed of the others, and the public never dreamed of them. To all outward appearances, she dwelt in the odor of eminent respectability and sedate gaiety.

"Drive slowly through Rock Creek Park until I tell you to return," she ordered the man when

they had passed beyond the station; then withdrew into a corner of the taxi, and busied herself with her thoughts.

It was almost two hours later that she gave him the Collingwood as a destination.

At the Collingwood she dismissed the taxi, and without sending up her name passed directly up to Mrs. Chartrand's apartment.

Miss Williams, who was on duty at the telephone desk, saw her—and whistled softly. The instant the elevator door clanged shut, she rang Harleston.

"If you can come down a moment, Mr. Harleston," she said softly, "I have some interesting information for you; it may not be well to—you know."

"I'll be down at once," Harleston replied.

When he appeared, it was with his hat and stick, as though he were going out.

"If anyone calls, Miss Williams," he remarked, pausing by her desk, "I'll be back in about half an hour."

"Very well, Mr. Harleston," she replied. Then she lowered her voice. "Your slender lady of the ripples, of the other night, has just come in. She's young, and a perfect peach for looks."

"Who is she?" he asked.

"I don't know. She didn't have herself announced; she went straight on up. Ben!" motioning to the elevator boy, "where did the slender woman, you just took up, get off?"

"At the fou'th flo', Miss Williams," said Ben. "She went into fo' one."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yas, Miss," the negro grinned, "I waited to see."

Miss Williams nodded a dismisal.

"Four one is Chartrands' apartment," she remarked.

"Is this the lady of the ripples?" Harleston asked, handing her the photograph of Madeline Spencer.

"Sure thing!" she exclaimed. "That's she, all right. How in the world did you ever—pardon me, Mr. Harleston, I shouldn't have said that."

"You're not meddling, Miss Williams. But it's a long story—too long to detail now. Some day soon I'll confide in you, for you've helped me very much in this matter and deserve to know. In fact, you've helped me more than you can imagine. Meanwhile mum's the word, remember."

"Mum, it is, Mr. Harleston," she replied. "For once a telephone girl won't leak, even to her best friends."

"I believe you," Harleston returned. "Keep your eyes open, also your *ears*, and report to me anything of interest as to our affair."

Miss Williams answered with a knowing nod and an intimate little smile, then swung around to answer a call. Harleston returned to his rooms. The happenings of the recent evening were quite intelligible to him now:

When the episode of the cab of the sleeping horse occurred, Mrs. Spencer was in the Chartrand apartment. Marston, in some way, had learned of Harleston's participation in the cab matter, and with Sparrow had followed him to the Collingwood, entering by the fire-escape—with the results already seen. The noise on the fire-escape was undoubtedly made by them, and the long interval that elapsed before they entered his apartment was consumed in reporting to her, or in locating his number.

One thing, however, was not clear: how they had learned so promptly of Harleston's part in the affair, and that it was he who had taken the letter

from the cab. Either someone had seen him at the cab and had babbled to the Marston crowd, or else Mrs. Winton or Mrs. Clephane had not been quite frank in her story. He instantly relieved Mrs. Clephane of culpability; Mrs. Winton did not count with him. Moreover, it was no longer of any moment—since Spencer's people knew and had acted on their knowledge, and were still acting on it—and were still without the letter. The important thing to Harleston was that it had served to disclose what promised to be a most serious matter to this country, and which, but for the trifling incident of the cab, would likely have gone through successfully—and America been irretrievably injured.

Madeline Spencer had assured him that the United States was not concerned; that the matter had to do only with a phase of the Balkan question. But such assurances were worthless and given only to deceive, and, further, were so understood by both of them. Maybe her story was true—only the future would prove it. Meanwhile you trust at your peril, *caveat emptor*, your eyes are your market, or words to similar effect. Of course he could cause her to be apprehended by the police, yet such

a course was unthinkable; it would violate every rule of the game; it would complicate relations with Germany, and afford her adequate ground for reprisals on our secret agents. A certain code of honour obtained with nations, as well as with criminals.

As he opened the door, the telephone rang. He took up the receiver.

"Hello!" he said.

"Is that you, Mr. Harleston?" came a soft voice.

"It is Madame X!" he smiled.

"Still Madame X?" she inflected.

"Only to one person."

"And to her no longer," she returned. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking about coming down to dine with you."

"Just what I was about to ask of you. Come at seven—to my apartment. I have something important to discuss."

"So have I," he replied. "I'll be along in an hour, or sooner if you want me."

"I want you, Mr. Harleston," she laughed, "but I can wait an hour, I suppose."

"Which may mean much or little," he replied.

"Just so.—You may try your diplomatic methods on solving the problem."

"My methods or my mind?" he asked.

"Your mental methods," she replied.

"I pass!" he exclaimed. "You may explain at dinner."

"Meanwhile, I recommend you to your diplomatic mind."

"Until dinner?"

"Certainly—and forever after, Mr. Harleston, be an ordinary man with me, please."

"Do you fancy that a *seeing* man can be just an ordinary man when *you* are with him?" he asked.

"I'm not required to fancy you what you're not," she returned.

"In other words, I'm not a seeing man?"

"Not especially, sir.—And there's another problem, for your diplomacy. *À bientôt*, Monsieur Harleston."

He telephoned to the Club for a taxi to be at the door at a quarter to seven; then dressed leisurely and descended.

"Any developments?" he inquired of Miss Williams.

"None," she replied. "Ripples hasn't come down yet."

"All right," said he. "Tell me in the morning—you're on duty then?"

She answered by a nod, the flash was calling her, and he passed on toward the door—just as the elevator shot down and Madeline Spencer stepped out.

"How do you do, Mr. Harleston?" said she, with a broad smile.

"Hello, Mrs. Spencer! I'm glad to see you," he returned. "If you're bound for the Chateau or downtown, won't you let me take you in my car? It's at the door."

"If you think you dare to risk your reputation, I'll be glad to accept," she replied.

"Is it a risk?" he asked.

"That is for you to judge," as he put her in.

"The Chateau?" he inquired;—and when she nodded he leaned forward and gave the order.

"I was surprised to see you—" he began.

"Why pretend you were surprised to see me?" she laughed. "You were not; nor am I to see you. We are too old foes to pretend as to the non-

essentials—when each knows them. The cards are on the table, Guy, play them open."

"How many cards are on the table?" he asked.

"All of mine."

"Then it's double dummy—with a blind deck on the side."

"Whose side?" she flashed back.

"Yours!" he returned pleasantly.

"What am I concealing?" she demanded.

"I don't know. If I did—it would be easier for me."

"The one thing I haven't told you, I can't tell you: the precise character of the business that brings me here. I've told you all I know—and broken my oath to do it. I can't well do more, Guy."

"No, you can't well do more," Harleston conceded. "And I can't well do less under all the —admitted circumstances; inferentially and directly admitted."

"Why did you—butt in?" she asked. "Why didn't you let the cab, and the letter, and well enough alone?"

"It was so mysterious; and so full of possi-

bilities," he smiled." And when I did it, I didn't know that you were interested."

"And it would have made you all the more prying if you had known," she retorted.

"Possibly! I've never yet heard that personal feelings entered into the diplomatic secret service—and no more have you, my lady."

"Personal feelings!" she smiled, and shrugged his answer aside. "When did you first know that I was concerned in this affair?"

"When I saw you in the Chateau," he replied—there was no obligation on him to mention the photograph.

"Which was?" she asked.

"The evening I met you in Peacock Alley. How long then had you been here?"

"Two days!"

"And not a word to me?"

"'Personal feelings do not enter into the diplomatic secret service,'" she quoted mockingly.

"Precisely," he agreed. "We understand each other and the game."

It served his purpose not to notice the mock in her tones. He very well understood what it imported and what prompted it. For the first

time the tigress had disclosed her claws. Hitherto it was always the soft caress and the soothing purr—and when she wished, her caress could be very soft and her purr very soothing. He had assumed that there were claws, but she had hidden them from him; and what is ever hidden one after a time forgets. And she had some justification for her resentment. He admitted to himself that his attitude and manner had been such as might cause her to believe that she was more to him than an opponent in a game, that he was about to forgive her past, and to ask her to warrant only for the future. And he had a notion that she was prepared to warrant and to keep the warrant—even as she had done with the Duke of Lotzen. Now it was ended. He knew it.

And she knew it, too. One sight of Mrs. Clephane with him and she realized that he was lost to her: Mrs. Clephane had all her outward grace and beauty, but not her past. Her woman's intuition had told her in the red-room of the Chateau; she knew absolutely when she saw his greeting to Mrs. Clephane in the corridor after her escape. She must go back to her Count de M——, her Cabinet Minister, and her Russian Grand

Duke. The only two men she had ever cared for would have none of her, despite her beauty and her fascination. Dalberg ever had scorned her; Harleston had looked with favour, wavered, was about to yield, when another—outwardly her *alter ego*, save only in the colour of her hair—appeared and filched him from her. And whether Dalberg's scorn or Harleston's defection was the more humiliating, she did not know. Together they made a mocking and a desolation of her love and her life. And as she came to hate with a fierce hatred the Princess whom Dalberg loved, so with an even more bitter hatred she hated Mrs. Clephane who had won Harleston from her. For while with Dalberg she never had the slightest chance, and knew it perfectly, with Harleston there was the bitterness of blasted hopes as well as of defeat.

And Harleston, sitting there beside her, the perfume of her hair and garments heavy about him, read much that was in her thoughts; and some remorse smote him—a little of remorse, that is—and he would have said something in mitigation of her judgment. But a look at her—and the excuse was put aside and the subject ended before it was

even begun. She was not one to accept excuses or to be proffered them, it were best to let the matter rest. Meanwhile, Mrs. Clephane must be warned of the danger confronting her.

He glanced again at her—and met her subtle smile.

"This Mrs. Clephane," she remarked with quiet derision, "wherein is she different from the rest of us?"

"By 'us' you mean whom?" he asked.

"The women you have known."

"And seen?"

"And seen."

"You're exceedingly catholic!" he smiled.

"You're exceedingly exclusive—and precipitate; and you haven't answered my question. Wherein is Mrs. Clephane different from the rest of us?"

"At the risk of being personal," he replied, "I should say that she is very like you in face and figure and manner. If her hair were black, the resemblance would be positively striking."

"Then, since we're on the personal equation, the difference is where?"

He threw up his hands and laughed to avoid the

obvious answer, an answer which she knew, and knew he wished to avoid.

"The difference is where?" she repeated.

"I shall let you judge if there is a difference, and if there is, what it is," he replied.

"I wish to know *your* mind, Mr. Harleston—I already know my own."

"Good girl!" he applauded.

"Please put me aside and consider Mrs. Clephane," she insisted. "Is she cleverer than—well, than I am?"

"You are the cleverest woman that I have ever known."

"Is she more intellectual?"

"Preserve me from the intellectual woman!" he exclaimed.

"Is she more travelled?"

"I think not."

"Is she superfically more cultured?"

"I should say not."

"Has she a better disposition?"

"No one could have a better disposition than you have ever shown to me."

"Is she more fascinating in manner?"

"She couldn't be!"

"She *is* younger?" tentatively.

Harleston did not reply.

"But very little—two or three years, maybe?" she added.

Again Harleston did not reply.

"Is her conversation more entertaining?" she resumed.

"Impossible!"

"Or more edifying?"

"Excuse me again!" he exclaimed. "Edifying is in the same class as intellectual."

"Then all Mrs. Clephane has on me is a few years?"

He nodded.

"Other things don't count with you, I assume—when they're of the past, and both have been a trifle tinctured."

She said it with affected carelessness and a ravishing smile; but Harleston was aware that underneath there was bitterness of spirit, and cold hate of the other woman. She had touched the pinch of the matter. Both knew it, and both knew the answer. Yet she was hoping against hope; and he was loath to hurt her needlessly, because Mrs. Clephane would be sure to catch the recoil,

and because he himself was very fond of her—despite all and Mrs. Clephane. He had seen his mistake in time, if it was a mistake, but that did not blind him to Madeline Spencer's fascinating manner and beautiful person, and to the fact that she cared for him. However, neither might he let pass the charge she had just made against Mrs. Clephane. Yet he tried to be kind to the woman beside him, while defending the woman who was absent, and, as is often the case under such circumstances, he played for time—the hotel was but a block away—and made a mess of it, so far as the woman beside him was concerned.

"Who are a trifle tinctured—and with what?" he asked.

She smiled languidly.

"That is scarcely worthy of you, Guy," she remarked. "You are aiming at—windmills; at least, I think you are not suddenly gone stupid. However, you do not need to answer. Mrs. Clephane, you think, is not tinctured, and you know that I have been—several shades deep. In other words, she surpasses me in your estimation in the petty matter of morals. So be it; you're no fool, and a pretty woman cannot blind you to the facts

for long. Then we shall see which you prefer. The woman who is honest about the tincture, or the woman who is not. Now let us drop the matter, and attend strictly to business until such time as the present business is ended,—and Mrs. Clephane appears as she is."

"So be it!" Harleston replied heartily, "We understand each other, Madeline."

"Yes, we understand each other," she said laconically, as the car drew in to the curb.

"So well, indeed," he continued, as he gave her his hand to the sidewalk, "that I have to arrange for you to meet the Secretary of State at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"Where?" said she, looking at him narrowly.

"In his office. You would like to meet him, Madeline?"

"I don't know what your play is," she laughed, "but I'll meet him—and take my chances. From all I can learn, the gentleman isn't much but bumptiousness and wind. To either you or me, Guy, he should be easy."

"The play," Harleston explained, "is that the Secretary has heard of you and wishes to see the remarkable woman who—almost upset a throne."

"His wish shall be gratified," she shrugged. "Will you come for me, or am I to go to him—a rendezvous *á deux?*"

"I'll escort you to him—afterward it will depend on you."

"Very good!" she replied—"but all the same I wonder what's the game."

"The Secretary's wish and curiosity is the only game," he replied.

"Far be it from me to balk either—when something may result of advantage to your——"

"—beautiful and fascinating self," he interjected.

She raised her eyebrows and laughed scornfully, as the lift bore her upwards.

XVI

ANOTHER LETTER

HARLESTON sauntered through Peacock Alley; not finding Mrs. Clephane, he had himself announced and went up to her apartment.

Outwardly he was impassive; inwardly there was the liveliest sensation of eagerness and anticipation. He could not recall a time when he had so much joy in living, and in the expectation of the woman. And when he felt Mrs. Clephane's small hand in his, and heard her bid him welcome, and looked into her eyes, he was well content to be alive—and with her.

"I've quite a lot to tell you," she smiled. "I'm so glad you could dine with me—it will give us much more time."

"Time is not of the essence of this contract," he replied.

"What contract?" she asked, with a fetching little frown of perplexity.

"The contract of the present—and the future."

"Oh, you mean our friendship— and that you won't doubt me ever again?"

"Precisely—and then some," he confided.

"What is the 'some', Mr. Harleston?" frowning again in perplexity.

"Whatever may happen," he said slowly.

"You mean it?" she asked.

"I mean it—and more—when I may."

"The 'more' and the 'may' are in the future," she remarked. "Meanwhile, what have you to report?"

"Very considerable," said he. "Mrs. Spencer was in the Collingwood, this afternoon—in the Chartrands' apartment. And the telephone girl recognized her as the woman who left the building on the night of the—cab."

"That explains a lot to you!" Mrs. Clephane exclaimed.

"The explanation isn't necessary, except to complete the chain of events," he replied. "We know the later and essential facts as to the letter. There is just one earlier circumstance that isn't clear to me; and while, as I say, it's immaterial

yet I'm curious. How did the Spencer gang know that I had taken the letter from the cab?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Clephane cried. "I fancy I can explain. You know I saw you at the cab. Well, when they released me, I concluded I'd give them something to think about, and I remarked that Mr. Harleston, of the United States Diplomatic Service, had stopped at the cab, looked inside, and then started the horse out Massachusetts Avenue. I thought I had told you."

"You didn't tell me, but it's very plain now. Madeline Spencer inferred the rest and instructed them how to act. And they came very close to turning the trick."

"You mean to getting the letter?" she cried.

He nodded. "I had gone to bed, when something told me to take precautions; I carried the letter across the corridor and gave it to a friend to keep for me until morning. A short time after, the three men called."

"Good Heavens!" she breathed. "What if they had gotten the letter."

"Unless they knew the key-word, they wouldn't have been any better off than are we—I mean than is the United States."

"I'm France, am I?" she smiled.

"For only this once—and not for long, I trust," he replied.

"Amen!" she exclaimed. "Also for ever more. I'll be so relieved to be out of it and back to my normal ways that I gladly promise never to try it again. I'm committed to seeing this affair through and to aiding the French Embassy in whatever way I can, both because I must keep faith with Madame Durrand, and because my inexperience and credulity lost it the letter. That done, and I'm for —you, Mr. Harleston!" she laughed.

"And I'm for you always—no matter whom you're for, nor what you may do or have done," he replied.

For just an instant she gave him her eyes; then the colour flamed up and she turned hastily away.

"Sit down, sir," she commanded—most adorably, he thought; "I had almost forgotten that I have something to tell you."

"You've been telling me a great deal," he confided.

She shrugged her answer over her shoulder, and peremptorily motioned him to a chair.

"Madame Durrand has been located," she be-

gan. "The Embassy telephoned me that she is in Passavant Hospital, getting along splendidly; and that she duly wired them of her accident and of my having the letter, with an identifying description of me. The wire was never received."

"It was blocked by a *present*," he remarked. "The wire never left the hospital."

"So the Marquis d'Hausonville said. He also assured me that the letter was of no immediate importance, and that steps were being taken to have it repeated."

"Which may be true," Harleston smiled, "but it is entirely safe to assume that he is acting precisely as though the letter was of the most immediate importance. You may be sure that the moment you left him he dispatched a cable to Paris reciting the facts, so that the Foreign Office could judge whether to cable the letter or to dispatch it by messenger. And he has the reply hours ago."—("Also," he might have added, "our State Department—only it may not be able to translate it.") "I should say, Mrs. Clephane, that your duty is done now, unless the Marquis calls on you for assistance. You have performed your part——"

"Very poorly," she interjected.

"On the contrary, you have performed it exceptionally well. You, a novice at this business, prevented the letter from falling into Spencer's hands, and so you blocked that part of their game. No, no, Mrs. Clephane, I regard you as more than acquitted of blame."

"You're always nice, Mr. Harleston!" she responded.

"Nice expresses very inadequately what I wish to be to you," he said slowly.

Again the flush came—and her glance wavered, and fled away.

"Meanwhile," he went on, "I am quite content to know that you think me nice to you."

She sprang up and moved out of distance, saying as she did so, with a ravishing smile:

"Nice is comprehended in other pleasant—adjectives."

"It is?" said he, advancing slowly toward her.

"But you, Mr. Harleston, are forbidden to guess how pleasant, or the particular adjective, until you're permitted."

"And you'll permit me to guess some day—and soon."

"Maybe so—and maybe not!" she laughed.

"It will depend on the both of us—and the business in hand. Diplomats, you are well aware, are given to very disingenuous ways and methods."

"In diplomacy," he appended. "A diplomat, as a rule, is merely a man of a little wider experience and more mature judgment—the American diplomat alone excepted, save in the secret service. Therefore he knows his mind, and what he wants; and he usually can be depended upon to keep after it until he gets it."

"And to want it after he gets it?" she inquired.

"Don't be cynical," he cautioned.

"I'm not. The world looks good to me, and I try to look good to the world."

"You have succeeded!" he exclaimed.

"I've about-faced," she went on. "Now I presume everybody trustworthy until it's proven otherwise. Time was, and not so long ago, when I was more than cynical; and I found it didn't pay in a woman. A man may be cynical and get away with it; a woman only injures her complexion, and makes trouble for herself. Me for the happy spirit, and side-stepping the bumps."

"Good girl!" Harleston applauded—thinking of her unhappy spirit, and the hard bumps she must

have endured during the time that the late deceased Clephane was whirling to an aeroplane finish. "You're a wonder, Mrs. Clephane," he ended.

"Aren't you afraid you'll make me vain?" she asked.

"It can't be done," he averred. "You simply can't be spoiled; you're much too sensible."

"La! la!" she trilled. "What a paragon of——"

—"everything," he adjected.

"Everything that I must be, if you so wish it."

"Just so!" he replied.

"Aren't you afraid of a paragon, Mr. Harleston?"

"Generally, yes; specifically, no."

"La! la!" she trilled again. "You're becoming mystic; which means mysterious, which means diplomatic, which means deception—which warns us to get back to the simple life and have dinner. Want dinner, Mr. Harleston?"

"With you, yes; also breakfast and luncheon daily."

"You couldn't do that unless you were my husband," she replied tantalizingly and adorably.

"I'm perfectly aware of it," he responded, lean-

ing forward over the back of the chair that separated them.

"But I'm not ready to take a husband, monsieur," she protested lightly.

"I'm perfectly aware of that also. When you are ready, madame, I am ready too. Until then I'm your good friend—and dinner companion."

He had spoken jestingly—yet the jest was mainly pretence; the real passion was there and ready the instant he let it control. As for Mrs. Clephane, Harleston did not know. Nor did she herself know—more than that she was quite content to be with him, and let him do for her, assured that he would not misunderstand, nor misinterpret, nor presume. So, across the chair's back, she held out her hand to him; and he took it, pressed it lightly, but answered never a word.

"Now you shall hear the special matter I've got bottled up," said she. "Whom do you think was here late this afternoon?"

"The Emperor of Spain!" he guessed.

"A diplomatic answer!" she mocked. "There is no Emperor of Spain; yet it's not absolutely wide of the diplomatic truth, for it was Mrs. Buissard—she of the cab, you'll remember."

"So!" Harleston exclaimed. "What's the move now; I fancy she was not paying a social visit."

"You fancy correctly," Mrs. Clephane replied. "She came to the apartment unannounced; and when I, chancing to be passing the door when she knocked, opened it, and saw who was without, I almost cried out with surprise. I didn't cry out, however. On the contrary, remembering diplomatic ways, I most cordially invited her in. To do her justice, Mrs. Buissard, beyond expressing hope that I had experienced no ill effect from the occurrence of the other night, wasted no time in coming to business."

"'Mrs. Clephane,' she said, sitting on the corner of the table just where you are sitting now, 'I have a proposition to make to you—may I make it?'

"I could see no reason to forbid, so I acquiesced.

"'And if you cannot accept straightway, will you promise to forget that it was made?' she asked.

"Again I acquiesced. I admit, I was curious.

"'We assume,' said she, 'that between France and Germany you are indifferent.'

"'Paris and Berlin have each their good points,' I replied.

"Quite so,' she acquiesced; 'just now, however, we ask you to favour Berlin and for a consideration.'

"'I don't want a consideration,' I smiled; 'tell me what's the favour you seek?'

"'We ask you,' she replied instantly, 'to take a letter to the French Ambassador and tell him that it is the letter Madame Durrand gave you in New York, and that it has just been returned to you by the American State Department.'

"'Have you the letter with you?' I asked.

"'I have,' she replied, producing it from her bag. 'It may not exactly resemble the original.'

"'It doesn't,' said I.

"'But the French Ambassador won't know it,' she smiled. 'Further, so as to make the matter entirely regular with you, you will receive an appointment in the German Secret Service and five thousand dollars in advance.'

"'Is it usual to—change sides so suddenly?' I asked.

"'You're not changing sides,' she explained. 'You've never had a side, in the diplomatic sense. It is entirely regular in diplomacy for you to take

such a course as is proposed; there is nothing unusual about it. And, my dear Mrs. Clephane, a position in the German Foreign Secret Service is a rare plum, I can assure you, even though you may not care to be—active in it.'

"Naturally, I understood. Mrs. Spencer thinking me the same type as herself, without conscience, character, or morals, had evolved this plan either to test me or to ensnare me. To test me, because she is jealous of you; or to ensnare me because she wants to win out diplomatically—or both, it may be. I am a poor hand at pretence; but I played the game, as you would say, to the best of my ability. So I seemed to fall in with her scheme; France was nothing to me; I had been given no option in the matter of accepting the letter and attempting its delivery; I had done all and more than could be expected of a disinterested person; I had lost the letter but through no fault of mine. I was acquitted of further responsibility; was at liberty to choose. And Mrs. Buissard agreed with me in everything. In the end, I accepted the spurious letter for delivery to the French Ambassador."

"Good!" Harleston applauded. "You're learn-

ing the method of diplomacy very rapidly; fire with fire, ruse with ruse, deceit with deceit—anything for the object in hand."

"It went against me to do it," she admitted, "but I'll pay them in their own coin—or something to that effect. Of course, I've no intention of delivering the letter to the French Embassy. I'll deliver it to you instead."

"Delightful!" Harleston exclaimed. "You're a bully diplomat. However, I'm not so sure that Spencer ever imagined her letter would reach the Marquis. She's playing for something else, though what is by no means clear. Let us have a look at the letter; maybe it will help."

She stood beside him as he cut the envelope and he took out the single sheet of paper—on which was an assortment of letters, set down separately and without relation to words.

"What is it," said she, "a scrambled alphabet?"

"Looks like it!" he smiled. "As a matter of fact, however, it's in the Blocked-Out Square cipher—like the original lett——"

"Then they could read the original?" she cut in.

"Not unless they have its particular key-word——"

"Oh, yes; I remember now," said she. "Go on!"

"There's no 'go on,'" he explained. "Nor would it help matters if there were. This letter is spurious; there is nothing to find from it, even if we could translate it. It's intended as a plant; either for us or for the Marquis; but I fancy, for us—so with your permission we will waste no time on it further than to keep alert for its purpose. When were you to receive the five thousand dollars?"

"I don't know!" she laughed.

"And the appointment to the German Secret Service?"

"I don't know; she didn't say and I didn't ask. I was too much occupied with meeting her on her own ground and playing the game. I was crazy to get the letter so I could show it to you."

"Which doubtless was what she too wanted; I can't see through her scheme—unless it is to muddy the water while the main play is being pulled off. And our men haven't discovered a single material thing, though they have had Spencer and all the rest of the gang under shadow since the morning after the cab affair."

The telephone buzzed. Mrs. Clephane answered it.

"Yes, Mr. Harleston is here," she said, passing the receiver to him.

"Hello!" said Harleston.

"Can you make it convenient to drop around here sometime this evening?" Major Ranleigh inquired.

"Will ten o'clock do?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there," said Harleston.

XVII

IN THE TAXI

At ten o'clock Harleston walked into Ranleigh's office.

"I just wish to ask," said the Major, "if you want us to pick up the man who met Mrs. Spencer this afternoon. It's against your orders, I know, but this chap can be arrested without resulting complications, I think. He's an American."

"Who is he?" Harleston asked.

"Snodgrass, an ex-Captain in the Army; a man of seeming independent means, who lives at the Boulogne."

"I'm acquainted with him," returned Harleston. "I can't think that he's crooked. I reckon Spencer's figure and face attracted him—or probably he has known her in Europe."

"I'm only giving you the facts: he's the first man, other than those of her entourage, that she has met since we've had her under surveillance.

It was at Union Station, this afternoon. She went there alone, after loitering for an hour through the shops of F Street. In the train-shed she chanced, seemingly by the veriest accident, upon Snodgrass. He almost bumped into her as they rounded the news-stand. From their gaiety they are old acquaintances; and after a word he turned and accompanied her to the cab-stand and put her in a taxi. As far as the shadow saw, there was no letter or papers passed—only conversation. And what he managed to overhear of it was seemingly quite innocent of value to us. He called her Madeline and she called him Billy, which isn't his name, and invited him to Paris; so they must be pretty well acquainted. They are to meet at one o'clock tomorrow. That's the first matter to report. The second is that Marston is spying around the French Embassy. He has walked up Sixteenth Street frequently since four o'clock, and never once glanced at the big marble mansion when he thought anyone was looking. His eyes were busy enough other times. Also he visited, after dark, Paublo's Eating-House in the Division, and had a talk with Jimmy-the-Snake—a professional burglar of the best class. We are watching The Snake,

of course. Something will be done at the French Embassy tonight, I imagine. Finally, at nine o'clock, Marston went to Carpenter's residence and was admitted. He came out fifteen minutes later, and returned to the Chateau. I assume that Carpenter will tell you of this errand."

Harleston nodded.

"What shall be done as to Snodgrass—also as to Mrs. Spencer and one o'clock tomorrow?" Ranleigh asked. "Do you wish me to prevent the meeting?"

"No," said Harleston, after a little consideration; "simply keep them in view and follow them. I can't imagine Snodgrass being concerned in this affair. It's the lady he's after, not her mission. It's likely he doesn't even know she's in the Secret Service. However, keep an eye on them; I may be mistaken."

The telephone buzzed. Ranleigh answered, then passed the instrument across to Harleston.

"Is that ycu, Harleston? . . . This is Carpenter. I've just had a most amazing proposition made to me. It will keep until morning, but drop around at the Department about nine-thirty and I'll unburden myself."

"Is it Marston?" Harleston asked.

"Exactly; however did you guess it?"

"However did you guess I was with Ranleigh?" Harleston laughed.

"I didn't guess; I called Mrs. Clephane, told her I wanted you—and presto! There's small trick about that, old fox—except in knowing your quarry. So long—and don't!"

"If you don't mind, Carpenter, I'll stop on my way home. I'm just beginning to be interested."

"Come along!" was the answer.

"Carpenter—to explain a Marston proposition," Harleston remarked, pushing back the instrument.

"They are muddying the water all around," Ranleigh commented. "So I imagine they are about to make a get-away with the goods."

"Try to, Ranleigh, try to," Harleston amended. "They won't make a get-away so long as we have Madame Spencer in our midst. Keep your eye on the dark-haired loveliness; with her in the landscape the goods are still here. Now for Carpenter."

"Permit me to suggest a taxi!" Ranleigh

observed. "It's just as well that you shouldn't wander about alone on the well-lighted streets of the National Capital——"

"You think I might be suspended by the Interstate Commerce Commission, or enjoined by the Federal Trades Commission, or be violating the Clayton Anti-Trust Act?"

"You might be any and all of them, God knows —as well as contrary to some paternal act of a non-thinking, theoretical, and subservient Congress. However, I'm pinning my faith to you and hoping for the best; Jimmy-the-Snake is cruising whether and whence and wherefore."

"Also besides and among!" Harleston laughed.

"Seriously, I mean it about The Snake," Ranleigh repeated; "and you'd better have this with you also," taking a small automatic from a drawer of his desk and handing it across. "You may have need of it; if you do, it will be very convenient."

Harleston, descending from the taxi, found Carpenter waiting for him on the front piazza.

"Your friend Marston is a very pleasant chap," he remarked; "also he has a most astonishing nerve. He actually tried to bribe me for a copy of the Clephane letter."

"How did you meet it?" Harleston asked.

"I was at a loss how to meet it—whether to be indignant and order him out, or to be acquiescently non-committal. I chose the latter course; and after a few preliminary feelers he came out with his offer: five thousand dollars for liberty to make a copy of the original letter. I thought a moment, then came back at him with the counter proposition: if he would secure the key-word from the French Embassy, I would obtain the letter; then together we would make the translation."

"Delightful!" Harleston applauded. "What did he say to that?"

"What could he do but accept? It was fair, and he had premised his offer by a solemn assurance that the United States was not involved!"

"Delightful!" said Harleston again. "I reckon you've seen the last of Marston."

"He said he would have the key-word by tomorrow night or sooner," Carpenter remarked.

"I suppose you parted like fellow conspirators," Harleston laughed.

"Yes; suspicious of each other and ready for anything. We were strictly professional. Diplomatic manners and distrustful hearts."

"Do you think that Marston will try for the key-word?" Harleston asked.

"I do! He probably has it, or rather Spencer has it. Also I think he will submit it for a test with the letter. He knows his attempt to bribe me failed, and that the only way he can have access to the letter is to come with the key-word. And you need not fear that I shall let him copy the letter until after I've tested the key-word and found it correct."

"Where is the letter?" Harleston asked.

"Locked in the burglar-proof safe in my office."

"Who knows the combination?"

"Spendel, my confidential clerk."

"Trustworthy?"

"I would as soon suspect myself."

"Very good! Now, another thing: do you know Fred Snodgrass, an ex-Captain of the Army, who lives at the Boulogne?"

"Casually," said Carpenter.

"Ever suspect him of being in the German pay?

"No. However, he is an intimate friend of Von Swinkle, the Second Secretary—if that's any indication."

"Rather the reverse, I should say. However,

he met Madeline Spencer yesterday in Union Station. The meeting was apparently accidental, and so far as his shadow could see or hear was entirely innocent."

"I distrust the apparently accidental and the entirely innocent—in diplomacy," Carpenter remarked. "We should keep an eye on Snodgrass."

"Meanwhile what are *you* doing as to the French key-word—trying for it?" Harleston asked, going toward the door.

Carpenter nodded. "I've got my lines out. I hope to land it in a few days. If Marston has it, or gets it earlier, so much the better for us."

Harleston had walked a block before he recollected that he was obligated to Ranleigh to go in a taxi. The one in which he had come from Headquarters he had dismissed, not knowing how long he would be at Carpenter's, and he had neglected to telephone for another. He would not go back to Carpenter's; and, anyway, it was nonsense always to be guarding himself from the enemy.

He had not a thing they wanted, nor did he know aught that would be of use to them; and his directorship of the affair was not of great import-

ance; another, if he knew the facts, could take his place and see the matter through. That was the important point, however. Time was exceedingly material; and if the Spencer gang caused him to disappear for a few days, they would have a free hand until Ranleigh or Carpenter awoke to the situation. It was not exactly just to the cause for him to take unnecessary chances. A drug store was but a short distance up the street, on the other side; he would telephone from it for a taxi.

A moment later, with the honk of a horn, a yellow taxi rounded the corner and bore his way.

He raised his stick to the driver, in event of him being free—and stepped out from the sidewalk.

The man shook his head in negation and the machine flashed by—leaving Harleston staring after it with a somewhat surprised and very much puzzled frown.

Madeline Spencer was in the taxi—alone. Furthermore, she had not seen him.

XVIII

DOUBT

At N, the next cross-street, the taxi turned west. Instantly Harleston made for the corner. When he got there, the machine was swinging north into Connecticut Avenue. He ran down N Street at the top of his speed. When he reached the avenue the car was not in sight, nor was there any one on the street as far as Dupont Circle; and as thoroughfares radiate from the Circle as the spokes of a wheel from the hub, the taxi could have gone in practically any direction.

So he gave over running—running after a taxi-cab was not in his line—and resumed his walk northward. At Dupont Circle he found a lone cab with a drowsy negro on the box; who came quickly to life, however, at his approach.

"Cab, seh, cab?" he solicited.

"Which way did the yellow taxi go that just came up Connecticut Avenue?" Harleston asked.

"Out Massachu'ts abenu', seh, yass seh.—Cab, seh?"

"Drive out Massachusetts Avenue," Harleston directed, getting in. "If you see a taxi, get close to it."

"I'll do hit, seh, yass seh!" said the negro, as he climbed on the box and jerked the lines.

But though they went out the avenue to beyond Sheridan Circle, and back again, and along the streets north of P and west of Twentieth, no taxi was seen—nor any trace of Madeline Spencer. They drove over the route for more than an hour—and never raised a yellow taxi nor a skirt. Finally Harleston abandoned the search and headed the cab for the Collingwood.

Miss Williams was on duty when he entered, and she signalled him to the desk.

"The Chateau has been trying to get you for the last half-hour," said she. "Shall I call them?"

"If you please," he replied. "I'll wait here."

Presently she nodded to Harleston; he stepped into the booth and closed the door.

"This is Mr. Harleston," said he.

"I recognize your voice, Guy, dear," came

Madeline Spencer's soft tones. "I'd know it *anywhere*, indeed."

"The same to you, my lady," Harleston returned. "Was that what you were calling me for?"

"No, no!" she laughed. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm back at the Chateau. I thought you might be interested, you know; you sprinted so rapidly up N Street, and spent so much time driving around in a cab searching for me, that I assume it will be a very great relief to you to know that I am returned. It was such a satisfaction, Guy, to feel that you were so solicitous for my safety, and I appreciate it, my dear, I appreciate it. Meanwhile, you might wish to get busy as to my *alter ego*. I saw her going up Sixteenth Street, as I was returning—a little after eleven o'clock. Maybe *she* needs assistance, Guy; you never can tell. See you tomorrow, old enemy. Good-bye for tonight."

"I say—are you there, Madeline?" Harleston ejaculated; then asked again. When no one answered, he hung up the receiver and came from the booth. Spencer, that time, had put one over him; two, maybe, for he *was* concerned about Mrs.

Clephane. Spencer had gone without her shadow, been free to transact her business, and returned—and all the time she knew of passing him and his pursuit of her, and was enjoying his discomfiture. To add a trifle more uneasiness, she had thrown in the matter of Mrs. Clephane. Probably it was false; yet he could not be sure and it troubled him. All of which, he was aware, Mrs. Spencer intended—and took a devilish joy in doing.

Harleston made a couple of turns up and down the room; then he sat down and drummed a bit on the table; finally he reached for the telephone. It was very late, but he would call her—she would understand.

He got the Chateau and, giving his name, asked whether Mrs. Clephane was on the first floor of the hotel. In a few minutes the answer came: she was not; should they give him her apartment? He said yes. Presently a sleepy voice answered. He recognized it as Marie—the maid—and had some difficulty in convincing her of his identity. He did it at last only by speaking French to her—which, as he had hitherto addressed her only in French, was not extraordinary.

And, being convinced, she answered promptly

enough that Mrs. Clephane was not in—she had gone down-stairs about two hours ago telling her not to wait up. She had no idea where Mrs. Clephane went; she had said nothing about leaving the hotel.

"Ask her to call me at the Collingwood the moment she comes in," said Harleston.

Then he got Ranleigh and told him of the Spencer episode and of Mrs. Clephane's disappearance.

"You would better put Mrs. Clephane under lock and key—or else stay with her and keep her from rash adventures," Ranleigh commented.

"I quite agree with you," said Harleston. "Meanwhile I might inquire where was Mrs. Spencer's shadow while she was taxiing up the avenue?"

"I fancy he was on his job, though you may not have seen him," Ranleigh replied. "His report in the morning will tell."

"I would sooner have a report as to Mrs. Clephane's whereabouts," Harleston remarked.

"I can't see what good she would be to them now?" said Ranleigh. "She hasn't a thing they want."

"Granted; yet where is she; moreover, she promised me to do nothing unusual and to beware of traps."

"She has the feminine right to reconsider," Ranleigh reminded him. "However, I'll instruct the bureau to get busy and——"

"Wait until morning," Harleston interjected. "If Mrs. Clephane hasn't appeared by nine o'clock, I'll telephone you."

Harleston leaned back in his chair frowning. Washington was not a large city, yet under certain circumstances she could be lost in it—and stay lost, with all the efforts of the police quite unavailing to find her. It seemed improbable that she had been abducted; as Ranleigh had said, they had nothing to gain from her. She could neither advance their plans nor hinder them; she was purely a negative quantity. Spencer might be striking at him through Mrs. Clephane, intending to hold her surety for his neutrality, or to feed her own revenge, or maybe both. Yet, somehow, he could not hold to the notion; it was too petty for their game. Moreover, Spencer knew that it would be ineffective, and she was not one to waste time in methods, petty or inefficient. Of course, it

might be that she had merely twitted him about the episode, as a jealous woman would do.

And yet what could have taken Mrs. Clephane from the hotel at such an hour, and without apprising her maid; and why was she driving up Sixteenth Street? Or was Spencer's talk just a lie; intended to throw a scare into him and give him a bad quarter of an hour—until he would venture to call up Mrs. Clephane's apartment? And if he did not venture, the bad quarter would last the balance of the night. At all events and whatever her idea Madeline Spencer had succeeded in disturbing him to an unusual degree—and all because of Mrs. Clephane.

At last he sprang up, threw on a light topcoat, grabbed a hat, and made for the door. He would go down to the Chateau and investigate. Anything was preferable to this miserable waiting.

The corridor door was swinging shut behind him, when his telephone buzzed. He flung back the door and reached the receiver in a bound.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

"I forgot to say, Guy," came Madeline Spencer's purring voice, "that I'll tell you in the morn-

ing, if you care to pay me a visit, how my *alter ego* came to be on Sixteenth Street at so unusual an hour. It's rather interesting as to details. By the way, you must be sitting beside the receiver expecting a call; you answered with such amazing promptness!" and she laughed softly. "Shall I expect you at eleven, or will you be content to wait until we go to the Department at four?"

"I had just finished talking with Mrs. Clephane when you called," Harleston replied imperturbably, then laughed mockingly. "I'll be at the Chateau for you at half-after-three; you can give me the details then. I shall be delighted, Madeline, to compare your details with hers."

"I wonder!" said she.

"What do you wonder?" said he.

"Whether you are—well, no matter; we'll take it up this afternoon. *Tout à l'heure, Monsieur Harleston!*"

He was turning once more toward the door, when the telephone rang again.

"Is that Mr. Harleston?" said Mrs. Clephane's lovely voice—and Harleston's grin almost flowed into the transmitter.

"It is indeed!" he responded—then severely:

"Where have you been, my lady? You have given me a most horrible fright."

"I cry your pardon, my lord; I'll not transgress again," she laughed. "And if you don't scold me I'll tell you something—something I'm sure will be worth even a diplomat's hearing."

"Anything you would tell would be well worth any diplomat's hearing," said he; "only I shall always prefer to be the diplomat on duty when you are doing the telling!"

"That's deliciously nice, Mr. Harleston; I——"

"Where are you now?" he demanded.

"At the Chateau—in my apartment. Anything more?"

"Nothing; except to pray you to be prudent and not do it again."

"I'll promise—until I see you." She lowered her voice—"Are you there, Mr. Harleston?"

"I'm here—since I can't be with you there," he replied.

"Assuredly not! I'm not exactly in receiving attire. Meanwhile the morning—and Madame Brunette's doings. Good-night, *Mon camarade.*"

XIX

MARSTON

At nine o'clock the next morning, Marston tapped gently on the door of Madeline Spencer's apartment, and was immediately admitted by the demure maid; who greeted him with a smile, which he repaid with a kiss—several of them, indeed—and an affectionate and pressing arm to her shapely and slender waist.

"I suppose monsieur wants to see my mistress," said she.

"Now that I've seen you, yes, little one," Marston returned, with another kiss.

"Have you seen me, monsieur?"

"Not half long enough, my love; but business before pleasure. There's another now, so run along and do your devoir."

She fetched him a tiny slap across his cheek, for which she was caught and made to suffer again; then she wriggled loose, and, with a flirty back-

ward kick at him, disappeared through the inner doorway.

In a moment she returned, dropped him a bit of curtsy, and informed him that her mistress would receive him.

He rewarded her with another caress, which she accepted with assumed shyness—and a wicked little pinch.

"I'll pay you later for the pinch!" he tossed back, softly.

She answered with an affected shrug and a wink.

"Elise *is* remarkably pretty!" Madeline Spencer remarked when he entered the boudoir. She was sitting up in bed, eating her rolls and coffee—a bewildering negligee of cerise and cream heightening the effect of her dead-white colouring and raven-black hair.

Marston drew in his breath sharply, then sighed.

"And *you* are ravishingly beautiful, my lady," he replied.

"You like this robe?" she asked.

"I—like you; what you may wear is incidental. It merely increases the effect of your wonderful personality."

"My good Marston!" she smiled. "What a

faithful friend you are; always seeing my few good points and being blind to my many bad."

"And being always," he added, bowing low, "your most humble and loving servant."

"I know it—and I am very, very grateful." She put aside the tray and languidly stretched her lithe length under the sheet. "What have you to report, Marston?" she asked.

"I have to report, madame," said Marston, with strict formality of a subordinate to his chief, "that I have procured the French code-book."

"Good work!" she exclaimed, sitting up sharply. "However did you manage it?"

"By the assistance of one Jimmy-the-Snake. He visited the French Embassy last night, and persuaded the safe to yield up the code. It would have been better, I admit, to copy the code and then replace it, but it wasn't possible. He had just sufficient time to grab the book and make a get-away. Someone was coming."

"You've accomplished enough even though we don't obtain the letter" she approved. "I shall recommend you for promotion, Marston."

She took the thin book and glanced through it until she came to the key-words of the Blocked-

Out Square—the last key-word was the one the Count de M—— had given her. After all, the Count was not so bad; and he was handsome; thus far dependable; and he was, seemingly at least, in love with her. She might do worse. . . . Yet he was not Harleston; there never was but one equal to Harleston, and that one was lost to her. She shut her lips tightly and a far-away look came into her eyes. And now Harleston, too, was lost to her; and—she lifted her hands resignedly, and laughed a mirthless laugh. As she came back to reality, she met Marston's curiously courteous glance with a bit of a shrug.

"Pardon my momentary abstraction," she said softly; "I was pursuing a train of thought——"

"And you didn't overtake it," he remarked.

"I can never overtake it. I haven't the requisite speed. Did you ever miss your two greatest opportunities, Marston?"

"I've missed my greatest," Marston replied instantly. "Oh—it was out of my class, so I never started."

"It may have been a mistake, my friend," she observed; "one never can tell until he's tried it—and failed. I mightn't have missed had I gone

on another schedule. However, the past is to profit by, and to forget if we can't remember it pleasantly. So let us return to the business in hand, Marston; it's a rattling business and a fascinating, and at it you and I are not to be altogether despised," throwing him a bewitching smile.

"Don't!" he exclaimed. "I'm not stone."

"Forgive me, my friend!" putting out her hand to him.

Marston simply bowed. "I think it wiser to refrain," he said gently, and bowed again. "By all means let us to the business in hand."

He understood her nature better than she thought. The sympathy in her was, for the moment, real enough, but it was only for the moment; the love of admiration was the controlling note—what she sought and what she played for. She felt the sympathy while it lasted, but it was the effect as to herself, the selfish effect, that inspired the sensation. When a beautiful woman stoops to sympathy, it is rare indeed that she does not thereby arouse admiration for herself. Madeline Spencer may have been cold and shrewd and selfish and calculating, yet with it all she was

warm-hearted; but the warm heart never got away with the cool head—unless it was with that head's permission and for its benefit. She played men—and men played her—but the man that had won was not yet to be found. Two only of those whom she tried had failed to succumb to her fascinating alluringness—and these two she had loved, and still did both love and hate.

"Returning then to the code-book and the letter," said she. "How about the latter; have you found Carpenter susceptible to persuasion?"

"To persuasion, no; to exchange, yes. Our agreement is that if I provide the key-word, he will provide the letter in question. At ten o'clock this morning the trick is to be turned."

"And if the translation concerns the United States, he simply would turn the key upon you and hold you prisoner until the matter is cleared up."

"One must take some risks," Marston observed.

She nodded slightly.

"Which of these do you fancy is the key-word?" she asked.

"We shall try them in turn, beginning with the last: *à l'aube du jour*. I've a hunch that we'll end there."

"And that you'll go into temporary confinement?" she smiled.

"My hunch stops with the key-word!" he smiled back.

"Your hunch as to the key-word is partially correct," she replied slowly, "but it does not, however, reach quite to the last conclusion. I may not explain now, Marston. Do you go to the meeting, with the code-book as your only exhibit. It should be indisputable proof of your good faith, and our honest belief that the letter does not concern the United States. Moreover, you run no danger of imprisonment, for you'll not effect a translation. But you must obtain a copy of the letter; it's but a fair exchange for the French code, you know; and you're permitted—nay you're authorized, in the interest of the service—to allow Carpenter to copy the book if he will give you the letter to copy. Furthermore, you may proceed leisurely in the process; there is no particular haste; while they are occupied with the letter matter, there is apt to be less activity along other lines. Only get a *copy of the letter;* I have the key-word."

"You have the key-word!" Marston exclaimed.

She nodded. "I'm quite sure of it; and the code-book confirms me. It is up to you to procure the letter; I'll do the rest, if any rest is necessary. We may be headed for Europe by evening, Marston; in which event, the cipher letter is of no consequence to us."

"You'll be glad to get back to Paris?" he asked.

"I shall, indeed—won't you?"

"I'm quite content anywhere, so long as I am working with you," he answered. It was much as a faithful dog would wag his tail and snuggle up for a pat of the hand.

She smiled straight into his eyes—a frank, appreciative smile, as though an intimate camaraderie existed between them, and would never be violated by either. She would have been in danger had she smiled that way at some men; they would not have remained quiescent. And a little more aggression by Marston might have been more conducive for success—less of the faithful dog and more of the independent subordinate and the equal human. As it was, he was only a plaything.

"Now, my friend, if you're done you may go," she said briskly. "I must dress, and you're rather *de trop* at such a time, however much you may be

welcome at another. And, Marston, don't miss the copy of the letter; I'll expect you with it at seven; we'll make the translation together, either here or on the train to New York. You're to accompany me, you know. I've an appointment at one, and another at four, but I'll be here at seven. If I'm detained, wait."

When Marston had gone she turned over and composed herself for sleep—it was two hours until she had need to array herself for luncheon and Snodgrass. . . . Yes, Snodgrass was a very good-looking chap; her drive with him last night had been very satisfactory; he had the requisite wealth, so it might be just as well to let him become fascinated. It would be at least a momentary diversion; something to occupy her for the loss of Harleston. She closed her eyes—and shivered ever so little. Damn Mrs. Clephane! But for her she would not have lost him.

She flung off the cover and sprang up. There was a chance left and she would try it. If it failed, she would not lose more than she had already lost. If it won, she won Harleston!

XX

PLAYING THE GAME

SHE threw a kimono around her and hastened to the telephone.

"Get me," she said to the hotel central, "Mr. Harleston at the Collingwood, the Cosmopolitan Club, or the State Department."

"I'll call you," said the operator—and Madeline Spencer leaned back in her chair and waited.

Presently the call came.

"I have Mr. Harleston for you," said the operator and switched on the trunk.

"Where are you, Guy?—this is Madeline Spencer," said she.

"I'm at the Collingwood, Madeline. Anything I can do for you?" was the answer.

"Yes. Be here in an hour; I must see you."

"Important?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll be there at ten-thirty."

"You're always good!" said she softly.

"Not always," he laughed, "but I will be this time."

She dressed in feverish haste, yet with great care and attention to effects. Her gown was a lustreless black silk, trimmed with gold and made as plain as her modiste would—and the styles permitted. Her hair was piled high, with an elongated twist; her dead-white complexion was unmarred by powder or rouge, and beneath the transparent skin the blood pulsed softly pink.

Her toilet finished, and passed upon in the mirror, she sent her maid on a shopping expedition which would occupy her until noon, and even hurried her off. She wanted no one about, not even Elise, when she made her last play at Harleston.

Elise gone five minutes before the hour, she compelled herself to outward tranquillity—while she strove for inward calm. And succeeding wonderfully well—so well, indeed, that none would ever have suspected the agitation seething under the cold placidity. Its only evidence was in the gentle swing of her narrow foot, and the nervous play of her slender fingers. And even these

indications disappeared at the knock on the corridor door; and she went almost blithely and flung it back—to Harleston bowing on the threshold.

"Punctual as usual!" she greeted.

"Because I came to one who is always punctual," he replied, taking her hand, nor dropping it until they were well inside the reception room.

"Sit down, old enemy," said she, sinking into a chair and pointing to another—which she had been careful to place just within reach. "You've nothing much to do for a short while, have you?"

"I've nothing much to do any time except to keep an eye on you!" he laughed.

"Am I so difficult?" she asked.

"You keep me fairly occupied at all times—and sometimes rather more."

"At least I endeavour not to offend your eye!" she smiled, her head on her hand, her eyes on him.

"The only difficulty is that you are too alluring," he returned. "One is prone to forget that his business is not to admire but to observe dispassionately and to block your plans. You're much too beautiful, Madeline; you usually make

monkeys of all of us, and while we're held fascinated by your loveliness you scoop the prize. It's not fair, my lady; you play with—loaded dice."

"Flatterer!" she said, melting into another pose.

"Flatterer!" he exclaimed. "If you could but see yourself now, you would confess the truth of the indictment. You're the loveliest thing, and you grow lovelier every day and younger. Positively, Madeline, you're a—" he paused for words and raised his hands helplessly.

"I'm a what?" she murmured, leaning a bit toward him.

"I haven't the word; there isn't one adequate to the—subject."

"You actually mean that?" she asked, gliding into another posture, even more alluring.

"You know I mean it," he declared. "Haven't we agreed to be honest with each other?"

"I've been honest!" she answered.

"Meaning that I've not been?"

"Have you?" she inflected. "I wonder, Guy."

She might just as well have asked direct his feeling for Mrs. Clephane—and he understood perfectly the question.

He nodded, slowly but none-the-less definitely.

She took a cigarette and lighted it with careful attention, then blew the smoke sharply against the incandescent coal.

"Guy," said she, "I'm about to speak plainly; please don't misunderstand; I'm simply a woman, now—a weak woman, perhaps; it will be for you to judge me at the end." She smiled faintly.

"Not a weak woman, Madeline," he replied. "Your worst enemy would not venture to call you that."

He wondered what more was coming, and at what directed. Her tone and attitude and deprecation of self were new to him. He had never seen her so; always she was the embodification of calm, self-reliance, poise, never flustered, never disturbed. A weak woman! It was so absurd as to be ridiculous, and she was aware of it. So what was the play with so bald a notice to beware?

"No, no, Guy," said she. "You think it's a play, but it isn't. It's the simple truth I'm about to tell you, and as truth I pray you take it."

"I'll take it as you wish it taken," he responded, more than ever mystified.

She carefully laid her cigarette on the receiver, then arose and leaned against the table, her hands

behind her. He arose also, but she declined the courtesy.

"Keep your seat," she said, "and don't be alarmed, I'm not preparing to have you daggered or garroted. Entirely the reverse, Guy. I've decided to offer terms: to capitulate; to throw the whole thing over; to betray my mission and get out of the service forever. No, don't smile incredulously, I mean it."

"Good Lord!" thought Harleston. "What is coming and where do we go?" What he said, however, was:

"Wouldn't you be incredulous if our positions were reversed? Madeline Spencer, the very Queen of the Service, betray her trust? Impossible!"

"Thank you, Guy," said she. "I've never yet been false to the hand that paid me—and sometimes *I've* paid dearly for keeping faith. Now for the first time,—and the last time, too, for if successful the service will know me no longer—I am ready and willing deliberately to make a failure of my mission, if you will take that failure as conclusive evidence of my good faith." She bent a bit forward and threw into her words and

tones and attitude every grace that she possessed. "Will you do it, Guy?"

"When you ask that way," said Harleston, "who of mankind would refuse you anything on earth."

She was alluring, wonderfully alluring. Time was, and that lately, when he would have succumbed. But that time was no longer; beside the raven-hair and dead-white cheek was now another face, with peach-blow cheek and the ruddy tresses—and the peach-blow cheek and ruddy tresses prevailed. And so he had responded, sincere enough, in tribute to her loveliness and in memory of what had been.

And Madeline Spencer detected the absent note; but she ignored it. She would go through with it—make her bid:

"Almost you say that as though you meant it!" she smiled, and forced his hand. Now he must either deny or affirm.

"I do mean it," he replied. It was all in the game, and he was obligated to be truthful only to Mrs. Clephane.

She looked at him contemplatively, trying to read behind his words.

"What is it, Madeline?" he asked.

"I wonder!" she said speculatively.

"Can't I answer?"

"Yes, you can answer——"

"Then ask me," he invited, seeking to get something that would afford him an inkling of her aim. Assuredly she had him guessing.

For a moment she looked him straight in the eyes; then suddenly her glance wavered, a faint flush crept from neck to cheek, and she smiled almost bashfully.

"Guy," said she, "I ask you to forget our profession, if you can, and take what I am about to say as free from guile or expediency—and of supreme importance to me. I'm just a simple woman now, with a woman's desires and affection and hopes. I've come to the parting of the ways: on one side lie power, excitement, loneliness; on the other, contentment, peace, companionship. I'll choose the latter, if you're willing. You have but to say the word and I'll give up everything, confess what I'm here for, what I've done, and what is arranged for in the future."

"Upon what condition, Madeline?" he smiled,

more puzzled than ever. He was almost ready to believe she meant it.

She caught her breath, hesitated, blushed furiously—and answered softly:

"Upon the condition that you marry me."

For the instant Harleston was too amazed for words; and, despite all his training in dissimulation, his surprise was evidenced in his face. Small wonder he had been unable to make out the play—it was not a play; she meant it. She was ready to throw her mission overboard to attain her personal end.

"Will you marry me, old enemy?" she whispered, putting out her hand to him and smiting him with a ravishing smile—a smile such as she had had for but one other man. It had been utterly lost on that other, but it had almost won with Harleston; and it might have won now with him but for another's smile, she of the ruddy tresses and peach-blow cheek.

"My dear Madeline," said he slowly, holding her hand with intimate pressure, "I cannot permit you to betray yourself for me. You are——"

"Quite old enough in the ways of the world," she interjected, "to know my own mind. I love

you, Guy, and unless I've mistaken your attitude, you love me. When our minds meet in such a matter, why should anything be permitted to intervene?" Her hand still lay in his; her eyes held his; her personality fairly enveloped them. With lips a little parted, she bent toward him. "It's a bit unusual, dear, for the woman to propose, to the man, but we are an unusual two, and the business of life has shaken us free from the conventions of the drawing-room and frothy society. With us there need be no cant nor pretence nor false modesty, because there is not the slightest possibility of misunderstanding."

"And yet, Madeline, we may not defy the right and permit you to sacrifice yourself," he opposed. "There is a standard which neither cant nor pretence nor false modesty can affect — the standard of honour."

"Honour!" she inflected. "What is honour, such honour, when a woman loves."

"Nothing—and therefore must the love abide; honour can't abide once it is lost."

She shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid it's not so much my honour as your love," she said. "A week ago, and I would have had a different answer

—in fact, I would have been the one to answer and *you* the one to ask. You know it quite as well as I; for when you left me that afternoon in Paris, expecting to return in the evening, you were ready to speak and I was ready with the answer. Then fate, in the person of an unsympathetic Foreign Office intervened, and sent you on the instant to St. Petersburg. We never met again until in this hotel. I have not changed, but you have. I fear your answer does not ring quite true; it isn't like you. Why is it, Guy?"

Never a reference to Mrs. Clephane; never an intimation—and yet Mrs. Clephane might as well have been in the room, so living was her presence.

"Madeline," said he, lingeringly freeing her hand, "I hardly know what to say nor how to say it. I'm embarrassed, frightfully embarrassed; yet you have been frank with me so I must be frank with you—even though it hurts. I'm distressed to have been such a bungler, such a miserable bungler, such a blind fool, indeed. The false impression must be due to me; assuredly, without the most justifiable cause you would not have drawn the erroneous inference. And a man who is responsible for that inference with a woman of

your experience and ability, Madeline, must be more or less a fool, even though his intentions have been absolutely correct."

"Which leads where, Guy?" she mocked.

"Nowhere," he replied, "I'm trying to say something, and can't say it. But you know what it is, Madeline. I'm sorry, supremely sorry. Let us forget this little talk, and go on as though it hadn't occurred—playing our parts in the present game and besting the other by every means in our power. I can't accept your offer, because I cannot pay the consideration. It still must be *à outrance* with us, Madeline; no quarter given and no quarter asked."

For a space she looked at him with cold repellence, eyes black as night. Then her eyes narrowed, and she laughed, a mirthlessly sarcastic laugh, so low that Harleston barely heard it.

"Is red hair then prettier than black, Mr. Harleston?" she asked mockingly; "or is Mrs. Clephane's character whiter than mine?"

"That is not worthy of you, Madeline," Harleston reproved. "You're a good sport; hitherto you've taken the count, as well as given it, without the flutter of an eyelash—and over far more

serious matters than your humble servant, who hasn't anything to give him value."

Again the sarcastic laugh. She knew he was playing the game, two games indeed, the diplomatic and his own. He had never forgot himself nor regarded her for one little instant.

"As a lecturer on morals, Mr. Harleston, you are a wonder," she mocked; "you have almost succeeded—nay quite, shall I say—in convincing yourself. And when you—a man—do that, what is to be expected of a woman—who is alone in the world? So I must accept your argument, and your conclusions, and be content with my duty—and"—with a sudden ravishing smile—"if I best you, Guy, you will have only yourself to blame. I won't send Mrs. Clephane a present, nor will I wish you joy of her, nor her of you; but *you* won't look for it, and *she* would think it somewhat presumptuous in me to assume to know you. These red-headed women are the very devil, Guy, after they've got you landed—also before, but in a different way."

"What's your game, Madeline?" he smiled. It had pleased her suddenly to veer around and re-

sume the play; and far be it from him to balk her. "I'll admit you have me guessing."

"I thought you believed me, Guy. My game was you—and I've lost."

"Nonsense!" he replied. "I was inclined to think so at first; your fine acting and man's conceit, I reckon. But my conceit has been punctured, and you've slipped a bit in your acting; therefore, to descend to the extremely commonplace, the jig is up."

"And the next lead is yours!" she laughed back.

"That is precisely why I asked you the game—so I could make an intelligible lead."

"Ask Mrs. Clephane!" she suggested.

"I'll do it," said he—and bowed himself out.

"Do it? Of course, you'll do it," Madeline Spencer gritted, as the door closed behind him. "I've no chance, it seems, against a red-haired woman. The other one also had red hair." She seized a vase from the table at her hand, and hurled it across the room. It crushed in fragments against the wall. "Damn Mrs. Clephane!" she said softly.

XXI

THE KEY-WORD

PROMPTLY at ten o'clock Marston walked into Carpenter's office and sent in his card.

It found Carpenter pacing up and down, and frowning at a paper spread open on his desk. At the messenger's apologetically discreet cough, he glanced around and took the extended card.

"Show him in!" he snapped, and swept the paper from the desk and into a drawer. . . . "Good-morning, sir!" as Marston bowed on the threshold; then, without any preliminaries: "What success?"

"I have the French code-book," Marston replied.

"With you?"

Marston drew out the slender book. "It embraces all their codes, I believe," he remarked.

"H-u-m!" said Carpenter thoughtfully, retriev-

ing the paper he had just swept into the drawer. "How are we to work it, Mr. Marston?"

"As allies," Marston replied. "I'm perfectly willing to let you have the book and everything in it, if you will let me have a copy of the letter. I'm confident that the key-word is here; I'm equally confident that the letter does not involve, either directly or indirectly, the United States. I understand that the letter is in the cipher of the Blocked-Out Square; in this book there are two pages and more of key-words to this Square, the last dozen or so of which are added in writing. If the letter is in that cipher, we should have no particular difficulty in finding the key-word. I would suggest, however, that we first try the last word on the list—maybe we won't have to go any farther."

"Very well," said Carpenter, briskly.

The advantage was all with him. If Marston thought the letter was only a line and that he could remember the letters used, he was in for a shock. No man living could remember twenty spilled alphabets; and if he attempted to make a copy it could easily be prevented. The Fifth Secretary spread the paper on the table.

"Here is a copy of the cipher letter in question—we had it made large for convenience," he explained. "The original is in the safe; you'll wish to compare it with the copy, so we'll have it here."

He gave the necessary order; when the letter was brought he passed it to Marston.

"I'll read the copy, if you'll hold the original," he said; and proceeded to call off the letters with amazing rapidity. "Correct, isn't it?" as he ended.

"Yes!" said Marston returning the original to Carpenter. He wanted in every way to disarm suspicion; moreover, a copy could be made more readily from a large typewritten edition than from the small, written original. "Now for the code-book and the last key-word—*à l'aube du jour*, I think it is . . . yes, *à l'aube du jour*, it is," and he handed the book across. "Shall we try it first, Mr. Carpenter?"

"By all means," said Carpenter. "Shall I set it down, or will you?"

One would never have imagined from his expression or his intonation that he had already tried *à l'aube du jour* for the key-word and failed;

nor that why he had failed he now knew. The book was right as to the word, and the slip that Harleston had taken from Crenshaw's pocket-book confirmed it. *À l'aube du jour* was not the key-word; but the key-word was constructed from it by some arbitrary rule; and that rule was susceptible of solution. After he was free of this fellow Marston, he would solve the problem quickly enough. It was as sure as tomorrow. The prescience was come.

"About twenty letters should be enough for experiment?" he suggested, taking up a test card.

When he had written the key-word and the letters under it, he, scarcely without reference to the Blocked-Out Square, wrote the translation. Marston did the same, very much slower.

"It doesn't fit!" Marston announced. "You can't make anything out of AGELUMTONZN, and so forth."

"I can't!" Carpenter smiled—and waited. Would Marston suggest the transposed or elided word?

"I'm disappointed," Marston confessed. "I thought sure we had it. Let's try the next key-word in the book."

They tried it, and the next, and all the rest. None of them translated the letter.

It took more than an hour; at the end, as a full measure of good faith and because it was of no further use to him—he having preserved a copy—Marston insisted that Carpenter retain the original of the French code-book and have a copy made, after which the book could be returned to him at the Chateau. During this hour and more his hand was in and out in his side coat-pocket. When he left the room there went with him, in that pocket, a copy of the original letter—roughly made by the sense of touch alone, yet none the less a copy and sufficiently distinct to be decipherable. For years Marston had practised writing in the dark and under all sorts of handicaps. In his pocket, a number of small slips of paper and a pencil were concealed. He would write a line, then take his hand from his pocket; after a time he would shift the page of paper, write another line, and then another, and so on until the copy was made. And all the while he was so frankly communicative, with apparently not the slightest intent to obtaining a copy—even tearing up the paper on which were the various trial translations

—that he completely deceived Carpenter. When he left, the latter went with him to the elevator and bowed him down.

"I don't quite understand their game," Carpenter chuckled, as he turned away, "but it's no matter. I took all the tricks this morning and still have a few trumps left. I thought he certainly would try for a copy of the letter, but he didn't even attempt it. He may have committed it to memory, but I'll chance it."

Returning to his office he gave the code-book another careful inspection and confirmed his impression as to its being authentic. Then he laid it aside, and took up the letter and *à l'aube du jour!*

First he tried it in reverse position: *ruoj ud ebua'l à.* The translation was gibberish. Then he wrote the first and last letters, the second and next to last, the third and the third from last, and so on. The result, too, was gibberish. Next he dropped the first word, 'à' and tried the rest —still gibberish. He dropped also the 'l'—still gibberish. Then, in turn, the 'a' of the third word the 'd' of the fourth, the 'j' of the last word—all gibberish. Next he wrote the key-word entire but

transposed the 'a' from the first letter to the last still gibberish. He began with the *'aube'*—still gibberish.

"Damn!" said he.

He was persuaded that the key-word was in the sentence before him; the code-book, Crenshaw's slip of paper, and his own hunch were convincing, yet the combination was slow in coming.

Du jour à l'aube was the next arrangement. He wrote it under the printed words and began to apply the Square.

The D and the A yielded A; the U and the B yielded V; the J and the C yielded E; the O and the D yielded R; the U and the E yielded T; the R and the F yielded I.

"*Averti*!"

Carpenter gave a soft whistle of satisfaction. French, it was—his hunch had not deceived him. The key-word was found!

Swiftly he worked out the rest of the cipher, setting down the letters of the translation without regard to words. "*Averti*" was evident because it was the first word. At the end, he had this result:

AVERTIQUELALLEMAGNEAENGAG
EUNOFFICIERADECELERLAFORM
ULESECRETEDESETATSUNISEMP
LOYEEACOLLODONNIERLAFULMI
COTONPOURLAPOUDRESANSFUME
EALARTILLERIEDEGROSCALIBR
EETQUEMADELINESPENCEREMIS
SAIREDELALLEMAGNEAPARISPH
OTOGRAPHIECIINCLUSEAETECH
ARGEEDELARECEVOIRNESEPEUT
DECOUVRIRLENOMDUTRAITRESP
ENCERESTPARTIEPOURNEWYORK
SURLALUSITANIAQUIDOITARRI
VERLEQUATORZEATOUTEFORCEI
NTERCEPTEZLAFORMULEOUEMPE
CHEZAMOINSQUELALLEMAGNENE
LOBTIENNESPENCERSIMPORTAN
TEALAFRANCE

There was not the least doubt as to it being in French—the last three words, as well as the first, proved it; also that he had the correct key-word. It only remained now to separate the result into words. And this puzzle presented no difficulties to Carpenter; he quickly marshalled it into form:

"*Averti que l'Allemagne a engagé un officier à déceler la formule sécrète des États-Unis employée à collodonnier la fulmi-coton pour la poudre sans*

fumée à l'artillerie de gros calibre; et que Madeline Spencer, émissaire de l'Allemagne à Paris,—photographiè ci, incluse—a été de chargée la recovoir. Ne se peut découvrir le nom du traître. Spencer est partie pour New York sur la Lusitania qui doit arriver le quatorze. À toute force interceptez la formule; ou empêchez à moins que l'Allemagne ne l'obtienne. Spencer pas importante à la France."

And under it he wrote the English translation: "Informed Germany has induced an officer to betray United States secret formula for colloding process of treating gun-cotton for smokeless powder for high power guns, and that Madeline Spencer, a German Secret agent in Paris, photograph enclosed herein, is delegated to receive same. Cannot ascertain name of traitor. Spencer sailed Lusitania, due New York, fourteenth. Take any means to intercept formula; or at least to prevent Germany obtaining it. Spencer not essential to France."

Spencer not essential to France! Surely this woman had great power, either of knowledge or of friends; she resided in Paris, yet France was reluctant to lift hand against her so long as she was on

French soil. Well, he would turn the matter over to Harleston; let him decide whether it was to be thumbs up or thumbs down for her Alluringness. Furthermore, the meeting with Snodgrass now assumed much significance. Snodgrass was an ex-army officer. Harleston must be warned at once.

He tried for him at the Collingwood, the Cosmopolitan, the Rataplan, and finally at the Chateau. He got him there.

"Can you come here at once?" he asked.

"Not well," said Harleston. "I've an appointment."

"Forget it!" Carpenter exclaimed. "I've found the key-word and made the translation. It's serious—Very well, come right in; I'll be waiting."

Harleston scribbled a note to Mrs. Clephane and sent it up by a page; he would be back in half an hour; would she meet him in the Alley.

XXII

THE RATAPLAN

A MOMENT before Harleston's return, Madeline Spencer, stepping out of the F Street elevator, was met by Snodgrass who had been walking up and down the lobby. They took a taxi and sped away; followed closely by another taxi, which their driver was most careful not to distance. A second later Harleston entered the corridor. As he was about to greet Mrs. Clephane, a man approached him and said:

"They have started, sir; Burke's just behind in a taxi—and both drivers are wise. They're bound for the Rataplan."

"Follow them and wait just outside," Harleston ordered—and turned to Mrs. Clephane. "I must go to the Rataplan at once," said he. "Let us lunch there. The end of the affair of the cab of the sleeping horse is in sight; I thought you might like to see it."

"I want to see it!" Mrs. Clephane exclaimed. "Have you found the key-word?"

"Carpenter found it—I'll tell you about it on the way out. Come along, little lady."

. . . . . .

"But why do you suspect Captain Snodgrass?" she inquired, when Harleston had finished his account. "He would not have access to the formula, would he?"

"The man that has access to such secrets never is the man who actually delivers," he explained; "he has a confederate. Snodgrass is the confederate, we think."

"Is this secret colloding process of gun-cotton so tremendously valuable?" she asked.

"It's a secret for which any nation would give millions of dollars. It's admittedly the most powerful explosive ever discovered, as well as the easiest handled. Temperature, weather, ordinary shock have absolutely no effect on it; in fire it simply chars and doesn't explode. Yet when it is exploded by the proper method, lyddite, dynamite, and all the other ites, are as a gentle zephyr in comparison. Now tell me about last night; where were you?"

"After you left," she explained, "I wrote some letters, and then went into the corridor to drop them in the chute beside the elevator shaft; as I approached, the car came down with Mrs. Spencer in it. Something impelled me to follow her; and running back I grabbed a cloak, and dashed for the elevator, catching it on the fly. She wasn't in the main corridor; on a chance, I hurried to the F Street entrance; I got there just as she stepped into a taxi and shot away. Instantly I called another taxi and told the driver to follow the car that had just departed. He did for a little way; but in a sudden halt of traffic at Vermont Avenue and H Street, where, you may remember, the street is torn up, we lost the other taxi; and though we drove around the north-west section for more than an hour on the chance that we'd come up with it—my driver knew the other driver —we never did come up with it. But as we rolled up to the Chateau, Mrs. Spencer was alighting from a limousine with a tall, fine-looking, fair-haired chap who had the walk of a military man."

"Snodgrass," Harleston observed.

"She saw me; and, with a maliciously charming

smile, nodded and went on. In the corridor I came on some friends and we talked awhile. Then I went up to my apartment, got your message, and telephoned to you."

"Don't do it again," he cautioned. "It was very dangerous."

They turned in at the Rataplan and drew up at the carriage entrance. Harleston helped Mrs. Clephane from the taxi and they passed into the Club-House.

He inquired of the doorman whether Mr. Carpenter was in, and another, servant, who overheard the question, added that Mr. Carpenter was in the dining-room. Harleston and Mrs. Clephane went directly in and to a table next to Carpenter's. Three tables away were Madeline Spencer and Snodgrass.

Harleston nodded to Mrs. Spencer and to Snodgrass, then spoke to Carpenter and invited him over.

"I don't know if you will remember me, Mrs. Clephane," said Carpenter, coming across. "I met you several years ago in Paris."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Carpenter, I remember you!" Mrs. Clephane replied.

"Anything?" Harleston asked, without moving his lips.

"Nothing. I was here when they arrived," Carpenter replied in the same manner—and went back to his table.

"Who is the woman with Harleston?" Snodgrass asked Mrs. Spencer. "I've never seen her."

"A Mrs. Clephane," Madeline Spencer replied. "She's very good-looking, isn't she?"

"I'm perfectly satisfied with the lady immediately in my fore," he smiled. "I don't run to blondes——"

"When you're with a brunette!" she smiled back.

"I don't run to anyone when I'm with you," he replied with quiet earnestness, leaning toward her across the table.

She shot him a knowing glance. Last night she had held him to strict propriety. Today in the taxi she had deliberately set herself to fascinate him, and had succeeded well. She had been demurely tantalizing—holding him at a distance, letting him come a little nearer, bringing him up sharply; all the tricks of the trade executed with a perfection of technic and a mastery of effect.

Snodgrass, with all his experience, was but a novice in her hands; she always struck directly at the affections—got them: and then the rest was easy. She never lost her head, nor allowed her own affections to become involved; save only twice—and both those times she had failed. Snodgrass, she had learned through inquiries, had quite sufficient money to make him worth her while; moreover, he was such a big, good-natured, dependable chap—and a gentleman. If he had not been a gentleman he would not have attracted Madeline Spencer for an instant. She dealt only in gentlemen.

She had not told Snodgrass of the Clephane letter, nor anything as to Harleston except to refer casually to him as the confidential emissary in delicate matters of the State Department. She had found that Snodgrass was not the actual man in the case; that he was simply a friendly confederate, or rather, to use his own words, "a friend of Davidson." She had expected that the package or letter would be delivered to her in the taxi; but Snodgrass had told her as soon as they were started that Davidson would forward it to him at the Rataplan by mail, not later than the

two o'clock delivery. He would get it as they were leaving and transfer it to her, accepting the consideration as specified by Davidson, and receipting for it. He said flatly that he did not want to know the contents of the letter; he was doing this favour for Davidson. He understood that it was to be entirely *sub rosa* and that nothing must ever transpire as to it. Therefore he was prepared to forget the entire episode the moment it was over; the epochal meetings with her he would not forget, nor would he permit her to forget him if constant devotion and assiduous attention were of avail. To which she had made a most demurely fitting answer, and the conversation thereafter grew exceedingly confidential. Oh, they were getting on very well indeed when the Rataplan was reached. And they were still progressing very well—in a discreetly informal way.

The entrance of Mrs. Clephane and Harleston was unexpected to Mrs. Spencer; Carpenter was a stranger to her and she had thought nothing of him; but when he spoke to Harleston, and seemed to know Mrs. Clephane, she put him on the list of the enemy. She kept him there when Snodgrass told her his name and position in the Diplomatic

Service and that it was reputed there was no cipher too difficult for him to solve.

"We would better be very circumspect," she said low. "I think that these two men are here to watch us; they know that I'm in the Secret Service, of Germany, and they're naturally suspicious of me."

"Carpenter was here when we came in," Snodgrass remarked. "He was sitting in the lobby. However, if you prefer, I'll let my mail go until evening."

"We can decide when we're through luncheon," she replied. "Haste is of vital importance, my instructions say. I had hoped to get away on the midnight train for New York, and to sail tomorrow for England."

"I had hoped to do the same!" he whispered.

"Really?" she asked.

"More than really! May I?" leaning forward.

"If you care to, Captain Snodgrass. It will be very pleasant to have you on board."

"And afterward?"

"You may not care for the afterward," she murmured.

"I'll risk it!" he exclaimed. "We'll sail to-morrow.

"And the letter?" she asked.

"I'll get it for you—or have it along!"

"What about the consideration?"

"Hang the consideration. I'll pay it myself, if need be."

"No, no, my friend!" she laughed. "I'm not worth so much, nor anything near it. And even though I were, I'd not permit the wasteful extravagance."

She might have added that she had no objection whatever to his wasteful extravagance, in fact, she would rather encourage it, if she were its object. Only that must come later—after the present business was finished, and they had sailed from New York. How long the extravagance would continue was dependent on the depth of his purse and his disposition.

"Wasteful extravagance does not apply where you are concerned," he replied. "However, we'll let Germany pay the consideration, and I'll have that much more to spend on you."

She rewarded him with one of her alluringly ravishing smiles and a touch of her slender foot.

She had him—and she knew she had him. She would be Madeline Spencer once again—always having a victim, and always ready for a fresh one. Since she had failed with Harleston, what mattered it how many the victims, or what the price they paid.

XXIII

CAUGHT

"Mrs. Spencer and her friend have reached some sort of an understanding," Mrs. Clephane remarked. "She just smiled at him significantly and pressed his foot."

"I noticed the smile but not the foot business," Harleston chuckled. "It's something quite personal to them, I take it!"

"Exactly; but what's the effect on the matter in hand? Does not this *personal* understanding signify that the delivery of the formula has been arranged, maybe even effected."

Harleston nodded. With Madeline Spencer it was, he knew, business first and personal matters afterward.

"I think we shall see the end of the affair of your cipher letter and its ramifications before the afternoon is over," he replied.

"What about the French Embassy?" she asked.

"The Marquis has been advised that we have the translation. He will keep his hands off, you may believe."

"You think either that Captain Snodgrass has the document in his possession, or that he has given it to Mrs. Spencer?"

"Or that it will come into his possession before they leave the Rataplan, and be transferred to her here or in the taxi on their way back to town," he added.

"What if he transferred it to her on their way here?"

"Then she still has it—once she gets it in her possession she won't part with it, even in her sleep, until she places it in the hands of the official who sent her to America."

"And Mr. Carpenter was here to watch until you came?"

"Yes—and afterward; you see one of us might be called away. From the time she and Snodgrass met at the Chateau this morning, they have not been out of espionage and close espionage. So long as they are in a taxi, or at the Rataplan, there is no danger of the document getting away if either of them has it; but until we are certain that

they have it, we won't detain them; we want the document to aid us in running down the traitor. I'm not at all sure that Snodgrass is aware of the character of the document. He probably stipulated not to know; he will be content with a division of the money—and with a chance to spend some of it on Spencer; which spending she is quite ready to facilitate, as witness the pleasant understanding they seem to have arrived at during luncheon."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Harleston?" Mrs. Clephane asked.

"I think you will enjoy it better if you're not wise, little lady!" he smiled. "Moreover, it depends on circumstances just how it's to be gone about—except that it ends in the office of the Secretary of State.—Hush!"

"The Secretary of State!" she exclaimed low.

"I've an appointment to take Mrs. Spencer to meet his Excellency at four o'clock."

"And what are you going to do with me, Mr. Harleston?" she smiled.

"You mean at four o'clock, or permanently?"

"At four o'clock, sir," with a charming lilt of the head.

"Take you along."

"With *that woman?* Thank you!"

"No, with me."

"Didn't you say you had an appointment to take Mrs. Spencer?"

"I did!"

"You intend to keep the appointment?"

"I do!"

"Surely, sir, you don't imagine for a moment that I would go anywhere with Mrs. Spencer!"

"No more than you imagine that I would ask it of you!" he smiled.

"It seems to me your meaning is somewhat obscure," she retorted. "However, whether you don't mean it, or do mean it, I'll trust myself to you because it's you, Mr. Harleston."

"Permanently, my lady?"

"Certainly not, sir. I refer only to this afternoon; I want to be in at the end of the game."

"For me," said Harleston slowly, "it's been a very fortunate game."

"Games are uncertain and sometimes costly," she shrugged.

"When played with Spencer, they are both and then some," he replied.

At that moment Carpenter pushed back his chair and arose, nodded pleasantly to Mrs. Clephane and Harleston as he passed, and went out.

"Will Mr. Carpenter be at the finish?" Mrs. Clephane asked.

"Probably; but he'll be in the lobby when we go through."

"They are going!" she whispered. "And they're coming this way."

As Mrs. Spencer and Snodgrass went by, the former with an intimate little look at Harleston, said confidentially:

"I'll be ready at half-past three, Guy."

"Very good!" Harleston answered promptly—when she was past, he looked at Mrs. Clephane.

"The cat!" she muttered; then smiled quizzically. "Such a pleasant air of proprietorship," she observed.

"Too pleasant," he returned. "I've something to tell you as to it and her, when the present matter is ended."

"Will it keep?"

He nodded. "I can tell it better then—and have more time for the telling."

The headwaiter approached casually, as though surveying the table.

"Well!" said Harleston.

"He went to the private mail boxes; she's waiting in the lobby," the man replied. "He received a small letter, which he opened; it enclosed only another envelope, which he put in his pocket without opening. He returned to the lobby and they left the Club-House."

Harleston nodded. "It's time for us to be moving," said he to Mrs. Clephane. "Will you trust me?" he asked as they passed into the lobby, at the far end of which Carpenter was sitting, absorbed in his cigar.

"Absolutely!" she replied.

"And will you go with Carpenter; he understands? I'll be with you shortly. I must act quickly now."

Carpenter arose as they neared.

"Just started," said he, and bowed to Mrs. Clephane.

"Mrs. Clephane understands," Harleston explained. "I confide her to your care. *À bientôt.*"

He hurried out. A taxi, waiting with power

on, sped up; he sprang aboard and it raced away.

As it neared the Connecticut Avenue bridge, the taxi slowed down a trifle and the driver half-faced around.

"The other car is just ahead, sir," he reported.

"Very good," said Harleston. "Does the driver know we're behind him?"

"I've signalled, sir, and he's answered."

"Maintain the distance," Harleston directed.

"Yes sir," said the man.

Keeping about a hundred yards apart—the two cars sped down the hill and around Dupont Circle to Massachusetts Avenue, thence by it and Sixteenth Street to H. The one in the lead continued on toward Fourteenth. Harleston's shot down Fifteenth, flashed over the tracks at Pennsylvania Avenue, swung into F Street, and drew in at the Chateau just as the other came around the Fourteenth Street corner, and rolled slowly up to the curb.

As Snodgrass was assisting Madeline Spencer to alight—and taking his time about it—Harleston glanced at his watch, sprang from his car, and hastened over.

"This is fortunate, Mrs. Spencer!" he exclaimed. "Just after you left the Rataplan the Secretary of State telephoned that he was summoned to the White House at four, and I should bring you an hour earlier. On the chance of overtaking you, I beat it after you. Now if Captain Snodgrass will permit you, we have just time to get over to the Department."

"Will you excuse me, Captain Snodgrass?" she asked, with her compelling smile.

"A Secretary of State may not be denied," Snodgrass replied. "In this instance in particular I would I were his Excellency."

"Come and dine with me at eight," giving him her hand. . . . "Now, Mr. Harleston, I am ready."

"What did you do with Mrs. Clephane?" she asked, when they were started.

"I left her at the Rataplan," he replied.

"Alone?"

"Oh no—with Carpenter, who chanced to be handy."

"The bald-headed chap, who spoke to you in the dining-room?"

"Exactly!"

"Carpenter is the chief of the Cipher Division, I believe you said."

"I don't recall that I said it, Madeline, but your information is correct."

"I think I'll ask the Secretary for the letter," she remarked.

"Ask him anything you've a mind to!" Harleston laughed. "You've a very winning pair of black eyes et cetera, my lady."

"I've never seen the Secretary!" she smiled.

"Small matter. He'll see you, all right."

"I'll make an impression, you think?"

"If you don't, it will be the first failure of the sort you've ever registered."

"Except with you," she murmured.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You've had me going many times."

"Yes, Guy—but not now," she whispered.

"Now, I'm strong!" he laughed, bluntly declining the overture.

"Hence you are willing that I try my smiles on the Secretary," she retorted.

"We are fellow diplomats," he countered. "You did me a good turn in the Du Plesis affair; I'm trying now to show my appreciation. More-

over, it will give Snodgrass an opportunity to reflect on your beauty and fascinating ways—and to look forward to eight o'clock."

"It is pleasant to have something agreeable to look forward to," she replied, ironically suggestive.

"Isn't it?" he approved. "I don't know anything more pleasant—unless it is the finishing stroke of an *affaire Diplomatique.*"

"Do you anticipate the finishing stroke to the present affair?"

"In due time."

"Due time?" she inflected.

"Whatever is necessary in the premises," he explained.

"It hasn't then gotten beyond the premises?"

"No, it hasn't gotten beyond the premises," he replied—with an inward chuckle.

There was no occasion to explain that, by the latter premises, he meant herself. His whole scheme was dependent on her having the traitorous letter in her possession. He was quite sure Snodgrass had received it by mail at the Rataplan; and why had he put the unopened envelope in his pocket unless to give it to her on their way to the Chateau. And as he (Harleston)

had caught her as she alighted from the taxi, and had hurried her off to the State Department, she must still have it. Of course, there was the possibility that Snodgrass had not yet delivered it; so Snodgrass was being looked after by others.

"Won't you give me a line on his Excellency, Guy?" she asked. "Is he easy, or difficult, or neither?"

"I may not betray the weak points of my chief!" Harleston smiled. "Moreover, here we are," as the taxi came to a stop on the Seventeenth Street side of an atrociously ugly, and miserably inadequate building that partially houses three Departments of the great American Government.

"Am I to be left alone with the great one?" she asked, as they went up the steps from the sidewalk.

"What do you wish me to do?" he inquired.

"Wait until I signal!"

"And if his Excellency signals first?"

"It will be for me to influence that signal," she replied.

They took the private elevator to the next floor. The old negro messenger was waiting at the door of the reception room and he bowed to the floor—a

portion of the bow was for Harleston, but by far the larger portion was for Madeline Spencer.

"De Sec'eta'y, seh, am waiting for you all at onct, Mars Ha'lison," he said; and ushering them across the big room to the Secretary's private office he swung back the heavy door and bowed them into the Presence.

As she passed the threshold, Mrs. Spencer caught her breath sharply, and straightened her shoulders just a trifle. She saw where she stood, and what was coming. Very well—she would defeat them yet.

XXIV

THE CANDLE FLAME

THE Secretary was standing by the window; with him were Mrs. Clephane and Carpenter.

"How do you do, Mrs. Spencer!" he said, without waiting for the formal presentation.

She dropped him—Continental fashion—a bit of curtsy and offered him her slender fingers; which, as well as the rest of her hand, he took and held. Its shapeliness together with her beauty of face and figure were instantly swept up by his appraising glance.

"Your Excellency is very gracious!" she murmured, bestowing on him a look that fairly dizzied him.

Small wonder, he thought, that she was reputed the most fascinating and loveliest secret agent in Europe—and the most dangerous to the other party involved; it would be a rare man, indeed, who could withstand such charms, to say nothing of the alluring and appealing ways that must go

with them. If he only might try them—just to test his own fine power of resistance and adamantine will! He shot a quick glance of suppressed irritation at Harleston—and Madeline Spencer saw it and smiled, turning the smile toward Harleston.

"I know what you are about to do," the smile said. "Now do it if you can. You were afraid to trust me alone with this man; you knew how easy he would be for me. Proceed with your game, Mr. Harleston—and play it out."

Meanwhile the Secretary, still holding her hand, was saying:

"Let me present the Fifth Assistant Secretary of State, Mr. Carpenter;—" and Carpenter received a smile only a little less dazzling than that bestowed on his chief— "I believe you have met Mrs. Clephane," he ended, and only then did he release her hand.

"Yes, I have met Mrs. Clephane," she replied indifferently, and without so much as a glance her way.

It was to be a battle, so why delay it?

"Your Excellency," said she, "when this appointment was made, some days ago, I thought that

it was merely to enable an insignificant woman to say that she had met a great dignitary and famous man. I think so no longer. It has assumed an international significance. I am here not as plain Madeline Spencer but as Madeline Spencer of the German Secret Service. It seems that a certain letter intended for the French Ambassador has gone astray, and has come into your possession; therefore I am to be asked to explain the matter, though I've never seen the letter nor know the cipher in which, I am told by Mr. Harleston, it is written. So what is it you would of me, your Excellency?"

"My dear Madame Spencer," said the Secretary, "what you say as to the original reason for this little meeting, arranged by our mutual friend, Mr. Harleston, is absolutely correct—except that it was a mere man who was desirous of being presented to a beautiful and a famous woman. It seems, however, that certain circumstances have suddenly arisen that made it imperative for the meeting to be advanced half an hour——"

"What are those circumstances, may I ask?" she cut in.

"I shall have to request Mr. Harleston to an-

swer. To be quite candid, Madame Spencer, I can only infer them; Mr. Harleston arranged them."

She turned to Harleston with a mocking smile.

"I am listening, monsieur," she inflected. "What is it you, or rather America, would of me?"

"The letter you have in your possession," said Harleston.

"The letter!" she marvelled. "Why, Mr. Harleston, you know quite well that I never had the Clephane letter."

"Very true; we have the Clephane letter, as you style it; and we have also a *translation*. What we want from you is the letter that Captain Snodgrass took from his mail box at the Rataplan this afternoon, and gave to you in the taxi on the way to the Chateau."

She smiled incredulously.

"Absurd, sir!" she replied. "Surely you are not serious!"

"Let me be entirely specific," he returned. "I'll put all my cards on the table and play them open."

"Double dummy, by all means!" she laughed, perching her lithe length on the arm of a chair,

one slender foot swinging slowly back and forth. "Your play, monsieur."

"There is no need to go back farther than this morning," he observed. "We knew that you were to meet Captain Snodgrass and lunch with him at one o'clock at the Rataplan. Your man Marston, when he visited Mr. Carpenter this morning, managed inadvertently to furnish the key-word of the Clephane letter. Do you see whither your meeting with Snodgrass, an ex-officer of the Army, in view of the translation of the letter leads, Madeline? Marston, I might remark, was quickly apprehended; if he made a copy of the letter, he had no opportunity to use it. Well, you went to the Rataplan with Snodgrass—every movement you two made, from the time you joined Snodgrass at the Chateau until I myself put you in my cab when you returned to the hotel, was observed by numerous and competent shadows. We were convinced that you were to receive the formula——"

"What formula, Guy?"

"The formula mentioned in the Clephane letter," he explained; "which formula you received from Snodgrass during the ride back from

the Rataplan to the Chateau. He received it there by post, and got it from his box as you were leaving. He even was foolish enough to open the original envelope, and to put the one enclosed, unopened, in his pocket. You immediately took a taxi for the Chateau. My taxi was close behind yours; and I caught you as you were alighting and hurried you off to——"

"This pleasant appointment!" she laughed. "I suppose, Guy, you want the envelope and contents—which you assume Captain Snodgrass transferred to me in the taxi; *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Exactly, Madeline."

"And it's three strong men and one woman against poor me," she shrugged—"unless Mrs. Clephane is merely a disinterested spectator."

"I am always interested in what Mr. Harleston does," Edith replied sweetly.

"Particularly when he is doing another woman," was the retort.

"It depends somewhat on the woman done," said Edith.

"Why are you here?" Mrs. Spencer laughed.

"To see the end of the affair of the cab-of-the-sleeping-horse."

Mrs. Spencer shrugged and turned to Harleston.

"Do you expect to end it, Guy?" she asked. "Because if you do, and this formulaic letter, that you think I have, will end it, I am sorry indeed to disappoint you. I haven't that letter, nor do I know anything as to it."

"In that event you have the consideration which you were to pay for the letter," Harleston returned.

"My dear Guy, where would I carry this consideration?" she laughed, with a sweeping motion to her narrow lingerie gown that could not so much as conceal a pocket.

"I don't imagine that you are carrying gold or even Bank of England notes. You're not so crude. The consideration is, most likely, a note to the German Ambassador, on the presentation of which the money will be paid in good American gold. And I'm so sure of the facts that it is either the formula or the consideration. The latter we shall not appropriate; the former we shall keep."

"And if I have neither?" she asked.

"Then we get neither—though that is a consummation most unlikely."

"And how are you to determine?"

"By your gracious surrender of it!"

She laughed softly. "But if I am not able to be gracious?"

"I trust that we shall not be obliged to go so far." And when she would have answered he cut her short, courteously but with finality. "You've lost, Madeline; now be a good loser. You've won from me, and made me pay stakes and then some —and I've paid and smiled."

"Exactly! You've paid; I can't pay, because one loses before one pays, and I haven't anything to lose."

"You will prove it?" he asked.

"Certainly," said she. "Do you wish me to submit to a search?"

"I don't wish it, but you have left no alternative."

"Burr!" went the telephone.

The Secretary answered. "Here is Mr. Harleston," he said and pushed the instrument over.

"This is Ranleigh," came the voice. "We've searched the man, also the cab, and found nothing beyond some innocent personal correspondence.

We've retained the correspondence and let the man go."

"That, I suppose," Mrs. Spencer remarked as Harleston hung up the receiver, "was to say that Mr. Snodgrass and the cab have been thoroughly searched and nothing suspicious found."

"Your intuition is marvellous," Harleston answered. "Major Ranleigh's report was that exactly. Consequently, Madeline, the letter must be with you."

"How about the consideration that Captain Snodgrass received from me in return for the formulaic letter?" she asked. "He doesn't seem to have had it."

"Maybe you managed both to get the letter from him and to keep the consideration. It would not be the first time I have known you to accomplish it."

"Only once—against you, Guy!" she laughed.

Which was a lie; but scored for her—and, for the moment, silenced him.

She shot a glance at the Secretary. He was beating a tattoo on the pad before him and looking calmly at her—as impersonal as though she were a door-jamb; and she understood: however much he

might be inclined to aid her, this was not the time for him even to appear interested. On another occasion, *à deux*, he would display sufficient ardour and admiration. At present it must be the impassive face and the judicial manner. The business of the great Government he had the honour to represent was at issue!

There being no help from that high and mighty quarter, she turned to Harleston.

"Well," with a shrug of resignation, "I've lost and must pay. Here," opening the mesh-bag that she carried, "is the——"

She threw up her hand, and a nasty little automatic was covering the Secretary's heart.

He gave a shout—and sat perfectly still. Mrs. Clephane, with an exclamation of fear, laid her hand on Harleston's arm. Carpenter was impassive. Harleston suppressed a smile.

"Tell them if I can shoot straight, Guy," Mrs. Spencer said pleasantly; "and meanwhile do you all keep your exact distance and position. Speak your piece, Mr. Harleston—tell his Excellency if I can shoot."

"I am quite ready to assume it without the testimony of Mr. Harleston, or ocular demon-

stration in this immediate direction," the Secretary remarked with a weak grin.

"Tell him, if I can shoot, Guy," she ordered.

"I've never seen her better," Harleston admitted; "though I'm not at all fearful for your Excellency. Mrs. Spencer won't shoot; she's only bluffing. If you'll say the word, I'll engage to disarm her."

"Meanwhile what happens to his Excellency?" Madeline Spencer mocked.

"Nothing whatever—except a few nervous moments."

"Try it, Mr. Secretary, and find out!" she laughed across the levelled revolver.

"Train your gun on Mr. Harleston and test him," the Secretary suggested, attempting to be facetious and failing.

Mrs. Spencer might be, probably was, bluffing but he did not propose to be the one to call it; the result was quite too uncertain. He had never looked into the muzzle of a revolver, and he found the experience distinctly unpleasant—she held the barrel so steady and pointed straight at his heart. Diplomatic secrets were wanted of course, but they were not to be purchased by the life of the

Secretary of State, nor even by an uncertain chance at it.

"Mr. Harleston's life isn't sufficiently valuable to the nation," she replied. "I prefer to shoot you, if necessary—though I trust it won't be necessary. What's a mere scrap of paper, without value save as a means to detect its author, compared to the life of the greatest American diplomat? Moreover, the letter would yield you nothing as to its meaning nor its author. The meaning you already know, since you have found the key-word to the cipher; so only the author remains; and as it is typewritten you will have small, very small, prospect from it." She had read the Secretary aright—and now she asked: "Am I not correct, your Excellency?"

"I think you are," the Secretary replied. "We all are obligated and quite ready to give our lives for our country, if the sacrifice will benefit it in the very least; yet I can't see the obligation in this instance, can you Harleston?"

"None in the least, sir, provided your life were at issue," Harleston answered. "For my part, I think it isn't even seriously threatened. If Mrs. Spencer will shift her aim to me, I'll take a chance."

Mrs. Clephane gave a suppressed exclamation and an involuntary motion of protest—and Mrs. Spencer saw her.

"Mrs. Clephane seems to be concerned lest I accept!" she jeered.

Mrs. Clephane blushed ravishingly, and Harleston caught her in the act; whereupon she blushed still more, and turned away.

"Play acting!" mocked Madeline Spencer—then, shrugging the matter aside, she turned to the Secretary. "Since we two are of one mind in the affair before us, your Excellency," she observed, "I fancy I may take it as settled. Nevertheless you will pardon me if I don't depress my aim until we have attended to a little matter; it will occupy us but a moment," making a step nearer the desk and away from the others, yet still holding them in her eye.

"What is it you wish, madame?" the Secretary inquired a trifle huskily; his throat was becoming somewhat parched by the anxiety of the situation.

"I see you have on your desk a small blue candle; employed, I assume, for melting wax for your private seal," she went on. "May I trouble your Excellency to light the aforesaid candle?"

The Secretary promptly struck a match, and managed with a most unsteady hand to touch it to the wick.

As the flame flared up, she drew a narrow envelope from her bag and tossed it on the desk before him.

"Now," said she, "will you be kind enough to look at the enclosure."

The Secretary took up the envelope and drew out the sheet. It was a single sheet of the thinnest texture used for foreign correspondence. He looked first at one side, then at the other.

"What do you see, sir?" she asked.

"The sheet is blank," he replied.

"Try the envelope," she recommended.

He turned it over. "It also is blank," he said.

"Sympathetic ink!" Carpenter laughed.

"Just what we are about to see, wise one!" she mocked. "Now, your Excellency, will you place the envelope in the candle's flame?"

The Secretary took the envelope by the tip of one corner and held it in the blaze until it was burned to his fingers—no writing was disclosed.

"Now the letter, please?" she directed. And when Carpenter would have protested, she cut him

short with a peremptory gesture. "Don't interrupt, sir!" she exclaimed.

And Carpenter laughed softly and did nothing more—being, with Harleston, in enjoyment of their chief's discomfiture.

"The letter—see—your Excellency," she repeated with a bewildering smile.

And as the flame crept down the thin sheet, just ahead of it, apparent to them all, crept also the writing, brought out by the heat. In a moment it was over; the last bit of the corner burning in a brass tray where the Secretary had dropped it.

"Now, Mr. Harleston," said Madeline Spencer, lowering her revolver as the final flicker of the flame expired, "I am ready to submit to a search."

Harleston glanced inquiringly at the Secretary.

"The lady is with you," the Secretary remarked with a sigh of relief.

"Very well, sir," said Harleston. "Ranleigh has a skilled woman in the waiting-room, she will officiate in the matter. We're not likely to find anything, but it's to provide against the chance." —And turning to Madeline Spencer: "Whatever the outcome, madame, you will leave Washington

tonight and sail from New York on the morrow; and I should advise you to remain abroad so long as you are in the Diplomatic Service."

And she—knowing very well that the search was necessary, and aware that while there was nothing incriminating upon her yet from that moment, until the ship that carried her passed out to sea, she would be under close espionage—answered, pleasantly as though accepting a courtesy tendered, and with a winning smile:

"I had arranged to sail tomorrow, Mr. Harleston, so it will be just as intended. Meanwhile, I'm at the service of your female assistant. She will find nothing, I assure you."

"Give me the pleasure of conducting you to her," Harleston replied, and swung open the door.

"If Mrs. Clephane will trust you with me," she inflected, flouting the other with a meaning look; which look flitted across the room to the Secretary and changed to one of interrogation as it met his eyes—calm eyes and steady, and with never a trace of the interest that she knew was behind them, yet dared not show—yet awhile.

And Mrs. Clephane answered her look by a shrug; and Harleston answered that to the Secre-

tary by a soft chuckle. As the door closed behind them, he remarked:

"At a more propitious time."

To which she responded:

"Which time may never come." Then she held out her hand. "Good-bye, Guy," she smiled.

"Good-bye, Madeline," said he; "and good luck another time—with other opponents."

"And we'll call this——"

"A stale-mate! I didn't win everything, yet what I lost was of no moment——"

"Do you think so?" she asked sharply.

"To my client, the United States," he added. "So far as I am concerned, Madeline, we still are friends."

He put out his hand again; she hesitated just an instant; then, with one of her rare, frank smiles, she laid her own hand in it.

"Guy," she whispered, "she wasn't as bad as she was painted; in fact, she wasn't bad at all—and I know."

. . . . . .

"Your Secretary of State is a peculiar man?" Mrs. Clephane observed, as she and Harleston came down the steps into the Avenue.

Harleston leaned over. "I'll confide to you that he is an egotistical and insufferable old ass," he whispered.

"And yet he thinks he is a perfect fascinator with the ladies!" she laughed. "Even now he is contemplating what a conquest he made of Mrs. Spencer. It was great fun to watch her playing him; and then how suddenly he pulled himself up and assumed a judicial manner—which deceived no one. Certainly it didn't deceive her, for the flying look she gave him, as she went out, was the cleverest thing she did. It told him everything he wanted to know, and simply gorged his vanity. She may be, doubtless is, a bad, bad lot; yet nevertheless I can't help liking her—and for finesse and skill she is a wonder." Then she looked at him demurely. "You're fond of her, Mr. Harleston, are you not?"

"I'm fond of her," he replied slowly; "but not as fond as I once was, and not so long ago. I'll tell you more about it before we go in to dinner this evening."

"I wasn't aware that we were to dine together. In fact, I was thinking of doing something else."

"But you *will* dine with me now, won't you?" he asked meaningly.

Her eyes hesitated, and fell, and a bewitching flush stole into her cheek; she understood that he asked of her something more than a mere dinner. And, after a pause, she answered softly, yet not so softly but that he heard:

"If you wish it, Monsieur Harleston."

THE END

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